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The House by the River

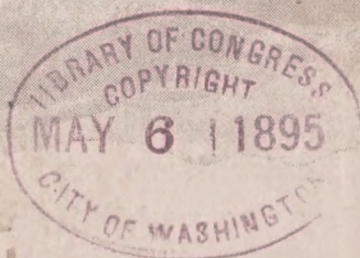
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THE HOUSE BY THE RIVER.

THE HOUSE BY THE RIVER

A Novel.

BY

BARBARA KENT.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY WARREN B. DAVIS.

NEW YORK:

ROBERT BONNER'S SONS,

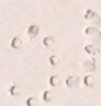
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THE HOUSE BY THE RIVER.

CHAPTER I.

THE club-room was very bright and warm. Under a tinted lamp two men sat smoking, yawning occasionally as they looked out at the falling snow, and then at the leaping fire in the brass grate.

“I say, Armstrong, did you know Raritan had come back?” asked little Charley Frere.

“The deuce !” said the other.

“Not the deuce at all, but a great, big, tanned fellow, with eyes like sapphires, and a handshake strong enough to grind an ordinary man’s fist to bits. Lucky fellow, too. He’s had his share of roughing it. He went away—let’s see—eight years ago, a stripling of twenty, poor as a pauper. He speculates, tries mining, spends four years as a trader in Honolulu, loses two fortunes, makes a third, bigger than either of the others, and, to cap his great good luck, hears that his

great-aunt Matilda has at last gone off the hooks and left him a cool two millions. If that isn't luck, I'd like to know a name for it."

"Is he going to settle in New York?"

"Yes, and be one of the biggest catches of the season."

"Then he didn't marry during his exile? If I remember Sidney Raritan right, he was not the sort of young chap likely to grow into a woman-hater."

"Perhaps he was disappointed in love."

"Perhaps. Have another cigar?"

Meanwhile, the man of whom they talked was crossing the marble hall of the club-house, and in another moment stood on the steps looking at the snow as it came blowing against his face in a white flurry.

Ah, how he loved it! This snowy night was so like the nights when, as a boy, he had coasted along this very street. How the white flakes came hurrying down! How quiet the great city was; even the roll of the cabs and the whirr of the elevated trains, that gleamed by in the distance, had their clamor softened to velvety sounds by its soft touch. Sidney drew up the collar of his great-coat, lined with shaggy bear-skin, and started at a swinging pace down the street.

"I'll walk back to the hotel, by Jove, and have a feast of this white, magical night. It seems specially ordered for me. Oh, after the sun of Honolulu, how exhilarating it is! After all, no land is like the place of one's birth," he thought, with a pleased laugh.

Crossing the wide avenue, he continued along the spacious side-street toward Broadway.

"It's good to be merry and wise;
It's good to be loyal and true;
It's good to be off with the old love
Before you are on with the new."

The old song broke softly from his lips all unconsciously.

"Hang it! What am I singing? Ah, there is no old love, and no new one, either, for that matter," he thought, a little bitterly. "In my mad struggle for fortune, there was no time for sentiment. Whether I could love or not, I do not know. It seems to me a girl, to touch my heart, must have more than beautiful eyes and pretty lips—more than mere beauty. In fact, she must—"

The thread of his musings was broken by a low, sobbing, frightened cry, that seemed to come from the ground at his very feet.

The spot was in the deepest shadows between the lamp-posts, and for a moment he could see nothing; but as he continued staring at the spot from which the heart-broken, terrified yet almost smothered weeping came, he detected a huddled figure, and saw that the snow was glorified by the long, golden strands of a girl's hair.

"Good heavens! Some poor outcast," was the thought in Sidney's mind, as, his warm heart aglow with pity, he stooped to lift the crouching figure from the bed of snow.

"You are in trouble?" he asked.

At the sound of his voice the girl—for she was not more than eighteen—gave a shuddering scream and moved rapidly away a few steps, then fell weakly upon the steps of a beautiful house, where the whiteness of the snow was brightened by the purple and crimson bars falling from a double doorway of stained glass.

"Oh, my heart—my poor heart!" she moaned in terror.

Sidney bent over her, and then started back with an exclamation. This was no outcast, as he had fancied,

but a radiantly lovely girl, the loose folds of a pale, dove-colored silk *peignoir* flapping in the icy wind.

On her small, clenched hands jewels glittered. Her face, while marked by an awful fear, was yet the gentle face of one used to refinement.

Ah, it was a pitiful, frightened pair of deep, dark eyes that were raised to his questioningly.

She looked as if she had fled hastily from a luxurious room ; for only thin slippers were on her feet, and her head was bare—the golden, glittering hair rippling around her like a veil that imprisoned sunbeams.

It was no time for parleying ; and Sidney, laying his hands forcibly upon her shoulders, forced her to look at him.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, in his low-toned, soothing voice, as he noted the startled, blank look in her great, dark eyes. “Why are you here ? Who has frightened you ? Let me take you home, won’t you ?”

“Home ? Home ?” and she started up, her whole body shuddering. “A murderer awaits me there—a murderer crazed by liquor and morphine ! This—this house is my home—this,” and she waved her hand toward the mansion at whose door she stood. “But I dare not venture in. A madman stands in the shadow. He tried to kill me. I feel his fingers yet upon my throat—I see his eyes !”

Was she the victim of delirium ? Had she escaped from a sick room while a careless nurse slept ?

Sidney could think of no other explanation of her words. That a madman had entered her home and tried to kill her seemed absurd.

“What did he look like—this would-be murderer ?” Sidney asked, trying to humor her, while he thought of some plan of getting her back into the house. “Do you know ?”

She broke into low, hopeless laughter.

"You think me mad—or wandering in my sleep, I see. Oh, if it were only so! What shall I do? How can I give my shameful secret to the world, and have the papers ring with it to-morrow? The story that I was found shivering outside my own door, afraid to enter, and all because this demon bears the name of husband to me, would read highly sensational to the public."

"Your husband?"

"Yes," she half sobbed. "He came home—as he has often done before—mad from his nights and days of dissipation. I heard his step in the hall, and my whole soul rose in revolt to think that it was to such a man I was married. I thought: Will he pass on to his own room? Will I be spared a sight of his hated face? These were my thoughts as I stood shivering."

While she spoke, she clung, half frantically, to Sidney's arm, and, as if fascinated by the pity and horror in his true eyes, gazed deeply into them.

"When he flung the door open, I saw a look on his face it had never worn before. I knew he had grown to hate me months ago, and in that terrible moment I saw he was mad, and that his hate would make him murder me."

Sidney doubted no longer; but as his eye fell upon the number on the door, he asked, hastily:

"Surely, this is the old Hetherford mansion?"

"It is. I am Ripley Hetherford's miserable wife."

No wonder a cold, shrinking feeling settled around Sidney's heart. So young Hetherford had come to this? With wealth, an old family name, a beautiful young wife, he had sunk to such depths as she described.

Sidney remembered the handsome lad young Heth-

erford had been, and then looked at this lovely, frightened face, so near to his own, whose terror was the result of his bestial cruelty. He shuddered to think of the change that must have come to him.

"Do not tremble so," he said, firmly, encouragingly. "I know Ripley Hetherford, and I will see that you suffer no more at his hands. Come; you are cold; your teeth are chattering. There—there—don't shrink away. Enter your home again boldly, and leave me to seek your husband, and either bring him to his senses or restrain him so that he can do you no further injury. Come. You wait in the drawing-room; he need not know that you have returned. I will find him."

She obeyed, as if led on resistlessly by that deep, magnetic voice, and by the firm hand that grasped her small, trembling one, and in a moment they stood on the top of the steps.

"The servants are all asleep," she faltered. "But I think I left the door open in my mad flight."

"Where did you leave your husband?" asked Sidney, gently.

"Upstairs," and she shot a terrified glance into the gloom above.

Pushing aside the portières at the drawing-room door, Sidney led her in, and she sank, half-fainting, into a deep, tapestried chair, by the fading embers of a wood-fire.

"Be careful—oh, be careful," she whispered, and for a moment clung to his hand.

Then, for the first time, Sidney realized how absolutely, flawlessly lovely she was. A brow and nose like Juno's; a small, full mouth, tenderly mobile; small, round chin, cleft by a deep, enticing dimple; eyes like those of the Spanish girls of Southern California—velvety, long-lashed, and filled with a radiance that

seemed to slumber far into their midnight depths ; hair like the gold of a sunset sky.

And her soft, prayerful voice—how it pierced his heart ! How her cold, clinging hands thrilled him !

As if looking at a dream, Sidney Raritan knew, in a shadowy way, as he stood there face to face with Vida Hetherford, that he could have loved her.

Could have ?

Bitter words that told she was not free—that she was beyond his winning ; bound by law to one who trampled upon what he should have cherished so tenderly—her woman's heart.

He withdrew from her half-unconscious grasp upon his hand, and hurried upstairs.

“ Hetherford ! ” the young wife below heard him call. “ Hetherford ! ”

There was no answer.

Sidney walked to where, at the end of a passage, a door stood ajar. Then Vida heard a whispered cry.

She waited breathlessly, and despite her fear, crept into the hall, listening.

“ What is it ? Why do I hear no sound ? ” she whispered to herself, while her heart seemed to rise in her throat and choke her.

And while she paused there, the suspense of a life-time crowded into a moment's space, she saw Sidney's white face appear above the balustrade. It was filled with an unspeakable horror.

“ Come. There is nothing to fear,” he said, in a strange voice.

Wonderingly she went up ; and forgetting that a few moments before they were strangers, he passed his strong arm tenderly about her.

“ It is horrible,” he said ; “ horrible ! But do not be afraid ; he will not hurt you—now.”

They stood at the threshold gazing at a figure stretched motionless on the floor.

It was Ripley Hetherford—silent—hideously silent.

His face was purple, and over his parted, rigid lips lay a stream of blood, slowly congealing.

As if in battle with some mysterious foe, he had died. His arms were twisted, and in one of his fiercely clenched hands a dagger still glistened.

“He is not dead?” Vida whispered, in an awed voice.

“Yes; I felt his heart. He has died from the bursting of a blood-vessel in the brain,” said Sidney in a quiet whisper.

“Dead?” said Vida, still in the same strange voice, as if she could not realize the appalling truth. “Dead! He is dead! He is dead!” she repeated.

As the last words left her lips, a weary sigh fluttered from them, and she swooned in Sidney’s arms.





CHAPTER II.

It was six months later, the middle of June, but not the sort of weather one might expect from the sunny month of roses.

This day was wet ; a chill wind stirring that robbed the apple-trees of their radiant pink bloom in shoals. The sky was heavy, a brooding, leaden gray ; the cows browsing in the damp pastures shivered and sought the shelter afforded by the blustering, swaying trees. All the landscape was drear and cold.

In one of the suburbs of New York city, just where all traces of the city's life were being lost in the green and solitude of the country, there was a long, narrow road that cut through a wood, sloped down a hill and then followed a straggling reed-edged stream for more than a mile.

On this road there stood a strange old house. It was lonely, shuttered, out of the regular track of travel and distinctly under a cloud of some sort.

Silent, weather-beaten, forlorn, it remained apart, holding within its walls the secret of a murder that had been committed there twenty years before.

It was known as "The House by the River," and few of the people living in its vicinity ventured past it after nightfall, or even in the full afternoon of a cheerless day like this.

And yet—surely there was now the sound of horses' hoofs splashing in the soft soil and the muffled roll of carriage-wheels !

Presently down the hill a mud-stained carriage appeared and paused at the long unused gates of the house by the river.

The door was opened, and while the driver from the small, northern station stared and stared at these visitors to the place so long shunned, an old negro, white-haired and bent, stepped out, followed by a man—but whether master or fellow-servant, negro also or white man, could not be ascertained.

“By the hokey-pokey, what's the matter with the man?” was the half-frightened thought in the driver's mind, and instinctively a chill ran through him. “Nayther whin he got out of the thrain nor whin he got into the carriage nor now, have I been able to get as much as a peep at his face.”

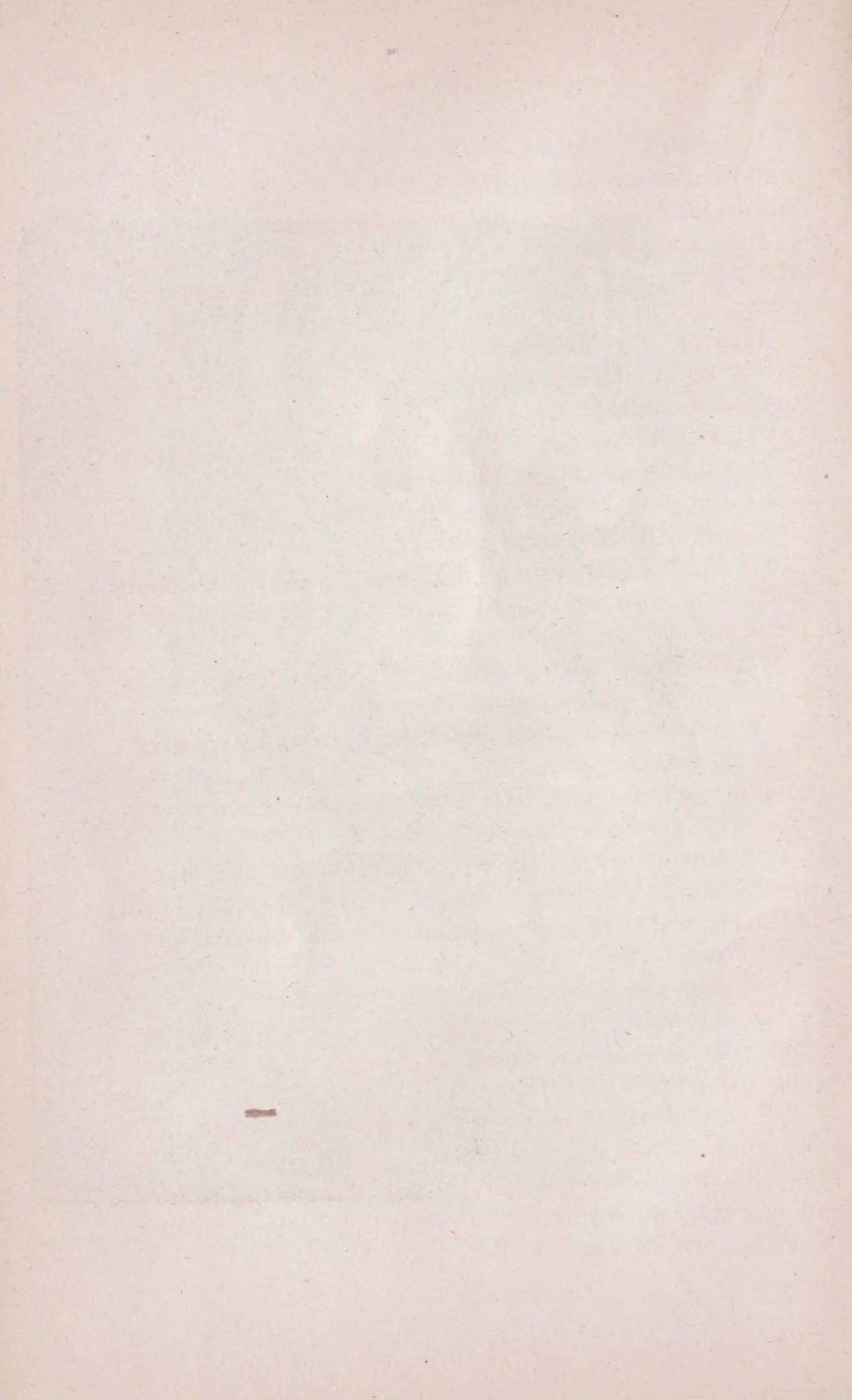
That strange figure was a man—this the broad shoulders and poise of head denoted—but so shrouded was he in the strange, long coat, his head wrapped in black silk, and the lower part of his face protected by a great, thick shawl, between which the dark, restless eyes alone were visible, that his personality was completely hidden.

As the driver saw the old negro unlocking the door of the mysterious house, he looked around at the wet, bleak landscape and then at those two lonely figures, and his broad, good-humored face grew pale.

“A fitting pair for such a place. The saints protect us if strange things are not done there before long. Whin a man comes wid his face covered as if he had the toothache and headache and small-pox all in one, and takes a house that every livin' bein' shuns as they would ould Nick, look out. That's all—look out.”



"LET ME TAKE YOU HOME, WON'T YOU?"—See Page 10.



With this wise reflection he whipped up his horses and rattled away, pausing, however, on the top of the hill to look back once and shake his head.

It was some time before the old negro could make the key turn in the rusty lock, and the strange newcomer struck his hand impatiently against the door.

"Hurry, for Heaven's sake, Remus!" came in a softly modulated but imperious voice from between the folds of the shawl.

"Here 't is massa. 'T war mighty stiff. You know it 's a monf since I war here last."

He flung back the door, and the strange, muffled figure entered with a stately stride.

"I fixed youah room, dar, sah," and the servant pointed to a door to the right of the narrow, old-fashioned hall.

Within there was a comfortably furnished study, a pile of fagots on the hearth ready for lighting.

"You have provisions, matches, everything ready?"

"Yas, massa. In a minute I 'll have a mighty good suppar ready for you. Ise got the chickens and everything right here in this yer hamper."

As he went toward the fireplace to start the fagots into a blaze, his master moved nearer, stretched out his arms, and they were clasped around the old servant's shoulders.

Was that a sob that came from the unseen lips?

"Oh, Remus, Remus—you are good—you are of gold! How shall I ever let you know what my heart feels for you?"

"'T ain't nothin', mas'r, 't ain't nothin'," Remus answered, his dimmed eyes clouding with tears. "'T is just this way: Ef you hadn't b'en good to ol' Remus all his life, he wouldn't be yere now. So, 't is only your reward, Mas'r Love."

"Not that name, Remus; never that name again," came in a shuddering whisper from the other's lips.

"Of co'se, Mas'r Fairleigh, I mean. I fo'got jes' for a minute. But you mustn't feel so bad. You'll be right comfo'ble here, and dere isn't no better cook in de hull country dan ol' Remus, ef he does say it hisself."

"All right and comfortable—yes," was the answer, tinged with an awful melancholy. "So I will be. Safe, well fed and quiet. I will be all of that. But what of my life, Remus—my hopes, my dreams? What of the great, bright, beautiful world, closed to me forever—lost—lost? Remus, what of that?"

He sank into a chair, and in the silence that ensued in the shaded room the pattering of the raindrops could be heard falling like silver drops upon a pall.

It was a picture that was all of gray—the shuttered room, the dark figures, the fireless hearth.

"Don', mas'r, don' say it! It breaks my heart to heah you!" prayed the old man.

But a sudden agony of regret and despair had seized the other, and he flung out his arms with a cry that voiced the revolt of a torn heart, a sick soul.

"Oh, if instead of giving me this ghastly secret to keep, you had killed me outright! What is death to this! Why, it is something sweet—sweet. And yet, coward that I am, I dare not snatch its forgetfulness for myself. I loved the world—men—the sunlight—fair women—my son—my friends—my ambition—and I have lost all. Is this fair? Oh, what a picture—what a picture! It is black without a gleam of light."

As he spoke, the old negro lit the wood and it blazed up cheerily.

"Draw your chair up, mas'r, and forget sech thoughts; come—do," he pleaded.

"I will in a moment, Remus," he answered, in a voice that was horribly quiet now, after the storm of feeling. "Leave me for a moment—a little while."

Obediently the old man hobbled out, and the strange occupant of the house by the river was alone, the great tongues of flame seeming to lick out toward him like friendly things, bidding him welcome to the gruesome abode.

He sighed, then a whisper, slow and fateful, left his lips.

"I said I had nothing to live for—nothing. And I forgot him. I forgot that here, in my seclusion, I could deal him the blow I have often longed to strike straight to his heart. Oh, yes, this much is left me. And I shall not fail to know of his every action, of his hopes, his plans. I shall wait until the time is ripe before I strike. It will be when he is happiest—when he loves happily, when there is no cloud in his sky—not one. Then the thunderbolt will fall."

A dreary laugh floated from his lips. It echoed in the shadowy corners like the sound from ghostly lips.

"A bitter purpose for life—yet it has sweetness in it. I hate him. And to think that once he was as dear to me as a brother. Love and hate lie close together. He wronged me, and I swear he shall repay me with what is dearest to him—his happy life."

He sat for a while longer looking at the fire, then rose wearily, and, going behind a curtain that shielded one of the corners of the room, changed his damp clothes, that were also wrinkled and dusty from long, long travel. When he emerged he was robed in a brown garment, as closely draped as a friar's robe.

The long, flowing, pointed sleeves fell down, completely hiding his hands; the cowl fell over his face so that only his dark beard was visible.

What sort of a man did that garment conceal? What kind of a heart beat under those folds? What manner of brain was covered by that gloomy hood?

No hint was given. The man was a mystery, and none shared his secret but the faithful old servitor who would gladly have died for him.

When the round table was daintily laid for dinner in the firelight's glow, and old Remus was busily tempting his master with the broiled chicken, salad and ruby-tinted wine, a loud knock sounded on the door.

"Lawd!" gasped Remus. "Who 's a comin' visitin' already? Who knows we wuz here?"

"Don't be alarmed, Remus," answered Mr. Fairleigh, an eager quaver in his voice. "I expect this visitor. He comes in answer to a letter I posted in New York. Show him in here."

"But—but—mas'r, ain't you afraid—ain't you scared? Ef he should find out about you!" faltered Remus, pausing half way to the door.

"Do not fear. I have a part to play, and I will do it well. You can trust me, Remus," and he waved his hand commandingly. "Hurry; it is no weather to stand outside."

Mr. Fairleigh rose and stood in an attitude of waiting as he heard the door opened. A man's voice spoke his name questioningly, and then footsteps followed old Remus down the hall the short distance to his door.

It was a small, spare man with a shrewd gray eye who stood there upon the threshold, his hat grasped in his hand.

An expression of suspicion and curiosity overspread his face, as he took in all the details of that room, only half revealed in the firelight.

The figure was not the sort of man he had expected to see. What mystery was here?

"Pray be seated, won't you, Mr. Griggs. I believe this is Mr. Griggs of the New York detective force?" and Mr. Fairleigh advanced a step.

"The same, sir."

"I am Mr. Fairleigh. You are doubtless surprised at the costume I wear, which so completely hides me. It is due to sensitiveness, which, I hope, you will not think foolish in a man of my years."

And there was a pitiful ring in the deep voice.

"The facts are these: A few months ago I was injured in a boiler explosion, and since then I have been an object of loathing in face and body. I would rather die than let the eyes of another rest upon my face, which is awful beyond words. My hands are shriveled to hideous things that do not look human. I have hidden myself from the world, and here I will die. But I am wealthy—enormously wealthy—and I have a purpose in view for which I require your help. It is for this I need you."

He sank into a chair as he finished speaking, evidently exhausted.

"That throws him off the track, I think," was his hasty thought.

"My dear sir, you need say no more," said Mr. Griggs, bowing. "I will respect your secret."

But to himself he said:

"Has he spoken the truth? I'll never rest until I see that face."

"And now to explain why I sent for you," said Mr. Fairleigh.

And even under the monkish sleeves, Griggs could see that his hands were clinched fiercely.

He leaned toward the detective, and while the rain pattered drearily on the roof, and the wood crackled fiercely, these words left his lips in a hissing whisper:

"You are in a world where I cannot be. I want to hire your eyes to do the work mine cannot. I want you to watch one man, and tell me just what his life is; send me a detailed account of his actions every day, as far as you can see them. This is all."

"Why, that is easy enough! And your reason—am I to know that, too?"

"All in good time. Not now. You must take me on faith, as a gentleman, a man of honor; one cursed by fate so that he must withdraw from all communication with men, but, nevertheless, so intensely interested in the life of this one man that he must know all—all about him; who his friends are—his sweetheart, if he has one—his plans—how he spends his days and nights. I would hire you to watch and report. Are you willing?"

"Of course, if you pay enough," and Griggs, the detective, chuckled shrewdly.

"You can set your own terms," said the voice from the shadow. "And unless they are beyond reason, I will not object."

"And how long will this shadowing continue?"

"I do not know; perhaps for months, perhaps only for days, perhaps for years."

"Well, I'm your man," said Griggs, heartily.

"You can commence at once?"

"Yes."

Mr. Fairleigh arose, leaned heavily on the table, and so strongly did his feelings sway him that his voice was breathless as he said:

"At the Albemarle Hotel you will find the man of whom I speak. You are to be like his shadow. Under one guise or another you are to enter the society he frequents. Spare no expense—no trouble; I will pay you. Become his friend if you can; learn to

know his heart—his secrets—his aims—his dearest desires. Can you do it?"

"Try me. The matter grows interesting. Who is the man?"

"His name is Raritan—Sidney Raritan—and he came from Honolulu six months ago. I have followed him here. Sidney Raritan ; remember the name."





CHAPTER III.

Nine o'clock.

The first act of "A White Lie" was over, and the plaudits were still echoing in Vida Hetherford's ears, as, gathering up the flowing satin train of her exquisite gown, she hurried into her dressing-room.

"The last night—the last night of triumph this season," she thought, as she stood with flashing eyes, diamond-bright, and sweet, flushed cheeks. "Will Sidney come—to night?"

A great change had come over young Mrs. Hetherford's life since we saw her standing at Sidney Raritan's side, gazing with awe-stricken eyes at the dead body of her husband, who had made her young life a series of horrors.

With her freedom came the knowledge that her husband had squandered his money madly, wantonly, and died a pauper.

The old Hetherford mansion went down under the auctioneer's hammer to the highest bidder. Poverty lifted its lean face to peer into the eyes of the sad-hearted young widow, who was left either to depend-

ence upon her own or her husband's relatives, or to battle with the world single-handed.

She chose the latter. Work promised so much to her : a chance to escape from her own thoughts—the sweetness of helping herself, that suited her high-spirited temperament better than dependence.

It was then that she remembered her success as an amateur actress before her unhappy marriage ; and she turned to the stage as the mine that was to yield her a fortune.

And it had. For three months now she had been before the New York public in a difficult and dramatic rôle, and a great future was prophesied for her. Her beauty was talked of everywhere ; even the European papers had copies of her lovely, radiant, girlish face.

And yet—all this adulation was as nothing to her compared with the music of one voice, the approval and love from one pair of eyes across the footlights, often close by, wherever they met. And the voice and eyes were those of Sidney Raritan. Oh, how Vida loved him !

That awful night when he held her little, shivering hand in his and led her gently in again to her desecrated home was always in her memory, enshrined in her heart.

He had been her champion, and through the months that followed there had sprung up between them a friendship that hovered on the borderland of love.

“ Surely he will come to-night. He knows that I leave for the seashore to-morrow ; that this is the last night of the season.”

And she sat down, leaning her bare arm upon her knee while her heart beat fast and anxiously.

“ He loves me. I could swear it. Have not his eyes told me so a thousand times ? But to-night, when he

comes, perhaps he will say the words that will transform this old world into an Eden of beauty for me. Sidney, I am waiting for you. I love you, my darling! I love you—I love you!”

The whispers had scarcely died away upon her crimson lips before she heard a strange voice in the passageway speaking her name.

Her heart sank with a throb of bitterest disappointment. This was not the lover for whom she waited, for whom her quivering heart cried out.

“Mrs. Hetherford doesn’t usually see her friends behind the scenes,” she heard one of the stage hands say. “But I’ll take your card in to her.”

A knock sounded on her door, and a second later a card was handed her.

CLYDE HASTINGS.

A frown gathered on her pretty brow, and she gave her snowy, bared shoulders a shrug of impatience.

Yes, she knew the name. This man had been an unsuccessful lover before she had married Ripley Hetherford. She had never liked him; his love had never moved her even to pity.

There was something about Clyde Hastings—perhaps it was his oily, deceitful smile, or the restless movements of his long, white fingers, or his stealthy way of walking—something—that had always repelled her.

He had been away for two years travelling wherever his fancy led him, for his wealth was great. How provoking that he should return on this night of all others,

when she was longing for a delightful talk with Sidney between the acts, her heart pulsing with the almost sure knowledge that when he did come, he would say something more tender than "good-by."

"Tell this gentleman I will see him in the green-room."

Then, as she passed out, she said to her maid :

"Marie, should Mr. Raritan come, hurry and tell me."

She moved easily, lightly along the heaps of scenery to the small room in white and gold, where some of the other actresses sat chatting with their friends.

As she entered the room, the heart of the man who rose to meet her commenced a nervous beating, that made even his bronzed, swarthy face grow pale.

No wonder he loved her ; no wonder her face had haunted him over strange lands and seas, and that nothing had helped to make him forget her and the passionate love she had refused.

She was lovely beyond words. Her golden hair and velvety, black eyes and her pouting, scarlet lips sent a fierce thrill to his heart.

"Vida, you are glad to see me ?" he asked in a hard, intense, almost bitter tone. "Oh, say you are ! Are you glad ? I would give ten years of my useless life to hear you say it, and knew you meant it from your heart."

How strange and fierce he was, and how hungrily he gazed at her ! The sight made her shudder. She almost feared him, and unconsciously she shrank from him in keen repulsion.

"An old friend returning, Mr. Hastings—" she said, with her pretty, engaging manner. But he allowed her to go no further. He loosened her hand almost roughly and drew back.

"No polite greetings between us, for Heaven's sake," he said, in a maddened whisper.

The corner where they stood was screened, and the hum of other voices prevented their conversation from being heard.

"Vida, I was in the South Sea Islands a month ago, when I heard for the first time you were free," he said, his keen, gray eyes commanding hers with a power in them which she hated. "And what did I do? Perhaps I was a fool. You alone can tell me that to-night. I set my face homeward, my one thought to see you, my one desire to tell you that time has made no difference with me."

She raised her hand as if to interrupt him, and he could see there was no welcome, no light in the half-averted face.

"No; let me finish," he burst out in smothered tones. "Let me tell you all, Vida,"—and, despite her resistance, his hot hand grasped and held hers—"I love you! My life is in your hands! You can make of me what you will, a beast or a hero. I have journeyed for thousands of miles just to tell you this again; for it is no new story to you. One summer night two years ago, on the deck of Lord Gower's yacht, I told you all you were to me. All that I said that night I mean now. You are free. I have never loved any but you. Will you marry me?"

"I am sorry," she said, in a whisper, shrinking from him. "Oh, I am sorry to hurt you, but—"

A laugh that was like a dirge floated from Clyde's lips, and his strong face blanched.

"The same old story," he said with a sigh, and then an impotent fury seemed to seize him. "Heaven! Why can't you love me? Others have. I say it without vanity. Yes; women no more to me than a pass-

ing shadow have given me their hearts ; and you, a girl for whom I would sacrifice heaven, are like ice to me."

His head sank on his clenched hands, and a dry sob shook his strong frame. Oh, the intensity of his passion for her ! It could make him sob like a woman—this man of nerve and will.

"Mr. Hastings," she said hastily, and there was a touch of pity in her tone, "I believe that no one ever loved me better than you do. Oh, believe me ! I feel keenly the honor of winning your heart. But who can solve the mystery of love ? You ask me in one breath why I cannot love you, and in the next tell me of women who have cared for you, for whom you could summon up no touch of sentiment. Doubtless, to unprejudiced eyes, these women were as fair as I am, and quite as worthy of your love. You passed them by—and loved me ! It is a pitiful story, indeed, but as old as time. I respect you ; you have my friendship ; but, although you love me, I must pass you by, and—and—" her voice was full of feeling as she faltered—"and love another."

Clyde started up as if stung by a lash.

"You are right. Say no more. It is the bitterness of my fate to lose you, but I cannot be resigned. I cannot ! I cannot ! I hate this man who has won you, whoever he may be ! I hate him !"

He grasped her hand fiercely and was gone.

It was late when Sidney Raritan reached the theatre. He had been detained by important business, and was only in time to hand Vida to her carriage.

As she saw him coming up the narrow stage-entrance toward her, all the coldness that had gathered around her yearning heart, as the hours had passed without

bringing him, was swept away, and an exultation rose like wine to her brain.

She let her eyes linger upon the soft waves of his amber hair above the white brow, the clear, expressive eyes of deepest blue contrasting so intensely with the bronze color of cheek and chin.

His hand sought hers, and together they walked out under the stars of June, unspoken love surging in the heart of each.

"Oh, why did you not come sooner?" Vida asked, a wistful light in her soft, dark eyes. "You know I leave early to-morrow for Narragansett, and our good-by must be so hurried."

Sidney could scarcely control his desire to take the young face close to his own and kiss those tempting lips until he wearied from sheer delight.

"Vida, may I not drive home with you?" he asked, and in the ordinary words there was a world of love.

"Ah, but when I gave you up, I accepted Mrs. Forster's invitation to drive home in her carriage, and she is waiting for me. I'm sorry, and—and—when will I see you again?" she continued, eagerly.

"In three days I'll follow you, if I may."

There was no time for more words. They were at the carriage door, and Mrs. Forster was there.

For a moment they stood face to face in the light of the gas-lamp.

"Good-by," were the words they uttered, but in Sidney's eyes there was a passionate promise.

"I'll come."

And Vida's throbbing heart was mirrored in the flashing, longing gaze that said:

"I'll wait for you."

A last burning handclasp and she was gone, whirled from his sight.

He looked after the carriage, a sudden heaviness weighing upon him.

"Not time for a word of all this passionate love that is torturing me! What abominable luck! I was a fool to fear to speak before. After that brute of a husband was dead three months, I might have told her, at least, secretly, how I adored her. Six months have passed, and still no promise binds us. Three days before I can see her again—an eternity. Oh, how I love her!"

He hurried away from the theatre, crossed Broadway, and entered Bryant Park to Fifth Avenue.

All his thoughts, all his passionate heart-throbs were for Vida. Her last look haunted him, thrilled him, caused his pulse-beats to quicken with fervor.

"Ah," he thought, "she does love me! Vida! My golden-haired, dark-eyed Vida! My life is yours."

"Sidney Raritan."

It was a slow, mocking, mysterious voice that spoke his name.

He wheeled around, and found himself face to face with Clyde Hastings.

Clyde's face wore a dark expression tinged with triumphant malice.

"Good heavens, Hastings, and I thought you on the other side of the world! Well, old fellow, how are you?" and Sidney held out his hand.

To his amazement, Clyde pushed it fiercely aside, while his gray eyes narrowed and flashed dangerously.

"We are friends no longer. When I'm a man's enemy I tell him so. I don't strike in the dark."

A soft laugh of unbelief fluttered from Sidney's lips, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"I say, Hastings, are you mad? What in Heaven's name have I done to you?"

"Simply this: You are Vida Hetherford's lover. I have loved her in vain for two years. When she was a girl of sixteen I asked her to marry me. She refused. To-night I asked her again. Again she was like a stone—yes, cold and hard as a stone. You had won."

The bitterness of his voice was fearfully intense.

"I see no reason for discussing Mrs. Hetherford in this way," replied Sidney, in a cold, forbidden tone.

"Don't you? Wait until you hear me through. I never envied you any of your luck among the mines. I never cared a jot when the beauties of San Francisco and the English girls at Honolulu flung themselves at your head. Fortune, the admiration of women, were less than nothing to me. But," and the words were hoarse, "I do envy you every glance from Vida Hetherford's eyes. Had she not met you—who knows?—my constancy might have touched her. I might have gained her for my wife. You don't know the bitterness of this thought to me. Heaven! It is like wormwood poisoning my heart! You shall not have her! If you persist in marrying her—"

"Well?" asked Sidney, coolly, although his blue eyes flashed dangerously.

"I'll ruin you," was the answer, sharply given.

"May I ask how? It isn't in your power."

"Don't be too sure. Perhaps you don't think I know one little secret of your past. You hated a man once, and he went away with you across the prairies. He never returned. It was as if the ground swallowed him. Where is he, Sidney Raritan? What have you done with the body of Allan Love?"

Although Sidney paled at the horrible question, his gaze met his accuser's unflinchingly.

"What do you mean? You talk in riddles!"

"Where is Allan Love?"

"I don't know."

There was silence for a moment, as Clyde's hand fell heavily on Sidney's shoulder.

"They say you murdered him," came like an adder's hiss from Hastings's tense lips.





CHAPTER IV.

"They say you murdered him."

How those words echoed and throbbed in Sidney Raritan's brain, as his horrified, angry eyes stared into the set, pale but triumphant face of the man who had only just declared himself his enemy.

Outside the small leafy enclosure could be heard the sleepy city sounds of a night in June. Sparrows, half awake, made soft, sleepy plaints in the trees rustling above them; a belated organ-grinder churned out his last tune:

"Oh, love for a year, a week, a day:
But alas for the love that loves away!"

The plaintive refrain surged into one voice with the echoing jar of a street-car down the half-deserted thoroughfare, and the words he had just heard seemed by some magic to have merged themselves in the air of the love-song beating, burning, throbbing in Sidney's brain.

"They say—they say—they say you murdered him."

At last the cold horror relaxed around his heart, and his deep-blue eyes under the dark, thick brows flashed with the light of defiance.

"It's a lie! A cowardly lie of your own coinage!" he said, in slow, contemptuous tones.

"You mean to say you were not the man Allan Love

went across the prairies with so mysteriously? Is that what you mean?"

"I am not here to answer your questions," said Sidney, hotly.

"No; but you look guilty. Every one in Honolulu suspects you."

"Then let them prove their suspicions. I am ready."

The evil frown on Hastings's face grew darker.

"Brave words enough. But there is one who saw the face of Allan Love's companion the night the two men passed through San Francisco on their mysterious errand. That man is the murdered man's son, Felix Love. Will you face him?"

Sidney folded his arms across his breast and paused for a moment before replying. Then these words flashed out:

"You said you would ruin me. Try it. I defy you!"

"You keep your secret well."

"I have not said I had a secret."

"I know you have. Do you deny there was trouble between you and Allan Love over the Latour mine?"

"No. He thought the mine worthless, and sold it to me for almost nothing. I made a fortune out of it, and he, with the injustice of a mean, narrow nature, turned his hatred and disappointment on me. What other information can I supply you with?"

"I know more than you think. Don't be so satirical, my friend. I wonder what Vida Hetherford will say when she finds you identified as a murderer, and knows—that not the Latour mine, but love for a woman, was the motive for the crime. My bargain with you is this: Give up—"

"I make no bargain with you!" cried Sidney, furiously.

"Then you're a fool," was the answer, in a strained,

hot tone. "For if you would give up Vida Hetherford, my lips would be dumb. Seek to carry out your intention of marrying her, and I will expose you. Now do you understand? Either way you will lose her. Choose the easiest."

After these words he turned and walked back toward Broadway.

Sidney remained in the narrow, winding path looking after him. Now that he was alone, an expression of keenest pain darkened his eyes, his pale face became set and cold, he moved slowly for a few steps, and then sank upon one of the deserted benches in the small park.

"And so the whole, hideous story must come out," came in a shuddering breath from his lips, as he leaned his head upon his clenched hand. "I wonder where that scoundrel, Allan Love, is hiding? For he has secreted himself in some corner, I know. I wonder what are his reasons for keeping dark? Probably"—and here a light flashed into his eyes—"for the very reason that has arisen. To throw suspicion upon me as his murderer. This is part of his revenge."

He shuddered.

"Oh, that night of darkness, fear and pain! Poor Aloha, so bitterly wronged! Poor child—her story—must it now become the property of the newspapers? How I grieve for her! How she prayed to be saved from shame! Poor little soul, the shame will cling to her now, forever! The story will hang like a shadow over her, and my silence, so long, will be of no avail."

Was that a step near him?

He turned quickly, but the path was deserted. And yet—and yet—he could have sworn he heard a movement.

A clock near at hand struck twelve, and with a

shiver, even in the warm night, he stood up, and hurried on.

“Will Vida, my Vida, believe me? Will she trust me through all? Oh, my darling, to think that one day you may look into my eyes, your own full of doubt, and ask me a question which I cannot, dare not answer! The thought drives me mad! It must not be! It must not be! And yet, can I treat this so lightly? Can I hide Aloha’s story from the world? Can I clear myself? Where is Allan Love? What does his silence all these months mean? What if by some accident he met his death after we had parted? What if another’s hand has murdered him, and the finger of suspicion points directly to me?”

As he hastened down Fifth Avenue, a shadow seemed walking at his side. How cold its presence was! How icy its fingers that seemed pressing on his heart! What warning words it whispered to him!

“Fool!” it seemed to say. “Buy your enemy’s silence at any cost. Is one girl’s love worth—your life? Fate has you fast in its toils. Oh, fool, staking so much on one woman’s kisses! Are there not others as fair for your choosing? Let Clyde Hastings win Vida Hetherford if he can, and so make him your friend. Give Vida up. What if you love her now? Give her up. You are innocent, you say? Yes, so you are. But in this world, are the guilty only punished? Ah, the countless innocent ones that have sat in dark cells, hoping to the last that light would come, the truth be known, their innocence proven! Thus have they sat hoping—yes, to the very shadow of the gallows. And their last cry, ‘I am innocent!’ has been received by an unbelieving world with shrugs or open unbelief. Beware! The first cloud has darkened your path. Others are coming. Beware!”

Horrible warnings, indeed ; they chilled Sidney to the core of his heart.

“Vida !” he called aloud. “Vida—my love—my life !”

Ere he reached home, he had come to a determination.

He would follow Vida to the sea, tell her he loved her, and, also, that there was a barrier at present to their union.

If she would wait and believe in him, well and good. He would have a brave heart, and set out again for the West, and seek to unravel the mystery of Allan Love’s disappearance.

He crossed to the window, and, standing in the shadow of its curtains, looked out upon the sleeping city.

How white and troubled his brave, handsome face had become ! The shadow of a story of sorrow and sin had been roused to-night by Clyde Hastings’s words and the memories hurt him bitterly.

As he stood there he became aware that a figure stood in the deepest shadow of the opposite street. He could see the whiteness of the white, upraised face in the fitful gaslight. He knew he was being watched.

“Is this Clyde Hastings’s work ? Am I not to take a step unmarked ?” he thought, his breath coming fiercely. “There was more than hate in his face to-night. There was a bitterness and disappointment almost fiendish. Who knows ? Perhaps he is contemplating having me disappear as mysteriously as Allan Love.”

Again and again he came back to the window, and always the crouching figure waited beyond the shadow.

Had he been able to see the man’s face closely, and recognized him, he would have been still more troubled,

for the eyes were the watchful, keen eyes of Theodore Griggs, the lynx of New York detectives.

As it was, he pushed the fair hair back from his forehead, and, drawing a chair up to the table, arranged the rose-shaded lamp, and, setting out writing materials, leaned his head upon his hand.

"I'll go to Vida to-morrow. But, in case there is any foul play thought of—in case I might meet with some accident and lose my life, I will leave her a silent defender of my honesty. I will tell her the story of that winter's night in New Mexico—the last time I saw or spoke to Allan Love."





CHAPTER V.

“JUNE 21ST—MIDNIGHT.

“I am all alone in my ‘den’ here. From one window Broadway stretches into space, so quiet now, although all during the day a roar rises from it as from a sea.

“Just opposite, Madison Square shines whitely in the glow of the electric light.

“Cabs rattle by, lights flash from many windows. It is New York.

“But my eyes seem to look to-night upon a far different scene—a scene wild, dreary, remote from civilization.

“Before me lies the prairie: white, wind-swept, lonely. I seem to stand again under the midnight sky in New Mexico, on one of the wildest nights that ever visited that trackless region.

“I am not alone. In the stage-coach, that creaks and sways, there is another figure. It is a man; and the small lamp which sways with every motion of the crazy vehicle shows his face, pallid, revengeful, morose, yet sullenly subdued.

“That man is Allan Love. He accompanies me, because he dare not disobey. I know of dealings of his with poor miners he has cheated that would send him to jail for the best years of his life.

“He hates me—I know it—but I have forced him to come with me. Where? He does not know.

"After being driven onward in silence for a few moments, he suddenly lifts his head from the big fur collar that shields it. I see his devil-may-care, handsome face—the face that, even at forty-three, has made such havoc with the hearts of trusting women who have been unfortunate enough to cross his path.

"Who would dream that a heart of stone was masquerading under those dark, expressive eyes? Who would believe that he lived only for his own pleasure, nor cared a jot what ruin he left in his path?

"I don't believe he loved a being in the world except his son Felix and the old negro who had followed him faithfully since babyhood—old 'Remus the Faithful,' as he was called.

"I meet his eyes steadily, never heeding the burning hate in them.

"'Where are we?' he asks. 'Are we going to ride all night in this stage? Perhaps this adventure suits you—it doesn't me. I'm chilled to the bone. How long is this farce to last, anyway?'

"'It will last—for another hour,' I answer calmly, as I look at my watch.

"'Remember,' his voice comes to me again, 'if you are tricking me—getting me into a tight place—I'll make you smart for it, Raritan.'

"I answer nothing, and the rest of the journey is continued in silence.

"At last, breaking upon the surging voice of the storm and the shouts of the driver to his almost exhausted horses, come other sounds and voices, and the stage draws up at a wooden shed that is a sort of apology for a station in this benighted spot.

"'The wagon is here, boss,' I hear some one say at my shoulder, and I turn to see a youth for whom I have been looking.

“ ‘There is another short drive,’ I say to Allan Love, motioning to him to precede me.

“Not once during the journey has he followed me. Blows from the back are of too frequent occurrence in those scenes of danger. I take no pains to hide the revolver that my hand grasps. It is not the first time I have taken my life in my hands, and Allan Love knows it.

“Once more we are on our way over the snow, this time in a heavy ox-cart. My companion utters no word, but I see that his eyes are glowing like coals. How he hates me! And to think that once we were friends, close friends! That was before I had read his narrow soul, before I knew that all the truth in him hung upon his plausible tongue. I know that to-night’s work will add another bit of fuel to the fire of his wrath, but I do not care.

“It is not of him I am thinking as I feel the snow stinging my face. The ache that troubles my heart has nothing to do with his part of this night’s story.

“Before a roughly built cabin on the banks of a shallow, frozen pool, the ox-cart halts. How clearly I seem to hear the driver’s cry, as he draws up.

“I pay him, tell him to wait a short distance away, and Allan Love and I are left alone, under the sloping shed.

“ ‘Well, does it suit your highness to speak now, and explain this cursed mystery? Isn’t it time to ring the curtain up?’ he asks, with an oath. ‘I’m about tired of this, I can tell you. What have you brought me here for? What do you want with me?’

“ ‘Yes, the time has come to speak.’

“I seize my revolver more fiercely; I look straight into his blazing eyes.

“ ‘I have brought you here to-night that I may witness your marriage with Aloha Brysdale.’

“If the quiet words had been a shot from a pistol he could not have recoiled more suddenly nor have grown more deadly white.

“ ‘What infernal nonsense is this?’ he asks in a voice choking with hate.

“ ‘Don’t bluster—don’t lie. The time for both is past,’ I reply. ‘Believe me, they will be of no use here to-night. You have men to deal with now, not a trusting, foolish girl who believed in you, followed you—who gave you her heart and received from your hand the cup of infamy.’

“ ‘It’s—it’s not true!’ he gasped. ‘I haven’t seen Aloha Brysdale since the night of the ball at her father’s house in Honolulu, more than a year ago.’

“ ‘Haven’t you, indeed? I have. You must be curious, then, to learn something about her.’

“He tries to strike the pistol from my hand, and I level it at him.

“ ‘I’d think no more of stopping the beating of your miserable heart,’ I say, ‘than I would of crushing a serpent’s head under my heel. Keep silent now, and listen.’

“I shall never forget his face as he stood there. Every feature seemed changed to gray stone, but his eyes move with a horrible restlessness, and flash like points of flame.

“ ‘As you seem forgetful of many points,’ I commence, ‘I’ll refresh your mind with some small details: I’ve known Aloha Brysdale since she was a laughing elf, dancing in her father’s house. I was her father’s friend. So were you. She grew up the pride of his heart, a beautiful, innocent, high-spirited girl as pure as a white rose.’

“ ‘You speak of the ball given in her father’s house to welcome the new English consul? I remember that you danced often with her that night. The gardens were radiant and glowing with the beauty of the night. I remember seeing you beside her at the fountain. You sat out many dances together, this girl of sixteen and you, and when the morn smiled in upon the tired dancers, and Aloha was curled upon a divan, fast asleep, like the child she was, the jasmine you had worn in your coat drooped among the laces on her breast.

“ ‘Three months afterward she disappeared. You were in California at the time. No one suspected you. I alone thought it strange—yet even I, who knew you so well, who knew you had broken your dead wife’s heart—could not think you vile enough to have robbed your friend of his daughter, as a thief comes in the night.

“ ‘A letter was received from Aloha. It was post-marked New York, and it said she had left to gain fame on the stage. Her father followed and could not find her. Of course, the letter was a lie. You know that.

“ ‘Months passed, and Aloha’s fate remained a mystery still. The true story was kept from society. Her family were supposed to know where she was. It was the desire of their lives to save her without letting the world know one tittle of her sad story.

“ ‘Matters were in this condition when, searching for a mine in this part of the country, called me here. Another chance made me seek this hut for safety.’

“ ‘I stop. My emotion is choking me, while Allan Love regards me with a mocking smile.

“ ‘And then?’ he asks, with a sneer.

“ ‘And then I found Aloha. You had cheated her—

tired of her. After you had told her an infamous untruth that the marriage you had had performed was no marriage, the poor child believed you and fled from you. You knew the marriage was legal. Did you know what had become of her? No. Did you care? Not a bit. I dare say you hoped she was quietly dead. Oh, it is such men as you who shame the name of man.'

"I strike on the door sharply but softly five times. At this signal it is opened. Allan Love, as white as death, stands staring into the small, shabby, firelit interior.

" 'Go in !' I command. 'I'll follow.'

"He has to obey, and holding his head up, while his guilty eyes search the room, he waveringly enters.

"An old Indian woman sits smoking over a bright fire. There is a clerical-looking man in one corner, a tall countryman at the table, holding a glass of hot brandy in his hand. I know him to be the sheriff, and I know he is there at my bidding.

"In the dimmest corner of the room there is a glimpse of a poor, small bed, shielded by calico curtains.

" 'She is there,' I say to Allan Love. 'Do you wish to speak to her?'

"His glance holds more venom than a serpent's sting as he snarls :

" 'No !'

"As the word falls from his lips a call seems to come from the couch. But it is not an articulate call. It is the weak, ailing whine of a new-born babe.

"He starts, and I see a crimson stain mount to his brow.

"His child? Yes ! A startled breath quivers on his

lips as he moves hastily forward and pulls the curtain back.

"It is a sight to thrill even his heart, so petrified with sin. Aloha, as daintily fair as a lily, lies there. Her golden hair ripples over the pillow. Her wide, yearning eyes are wan and dark-circled. One arm is out-flung on the patchwork quilt; the other is curved around a poor little creature that seems but the ghost of a babe.

"Will he kneel and ask pardon of the girl whose life he has so brutally darkened? Will he touch with reverent fingers the infant's waxen cheek?

"There is dead silence in the room. Allan Love does not move, and the only expression upon his face is keenest defeat.

"Ah—you have come—at last!"

"Aloha's voice flings out that passionate, bitter cry—the cry of a woman who has lived in the most woeful sense.

"He does not answer.

"After you really marry me,' she says, without a tinge of tenderness or forgiveness, 'go away—out of my life—out of my sight forever, and I will pray to God that I may never look upon your face again!"

"Though I lived a century I shall never forget that scene.

"Allan Love's unwilling hand is in the loose clasp of the girl's white fingers, the clergyman looms up in the ruddy glow of the fire, the sheriff watches behind. I stand as one witness, a revolver in one hand; the old Indian servant is the other.

"Poor, beautiful Aloha, what a bridal!"

"My heart swells with wrath and pity all through that gloomy ceremony, but at last it is finished. I was satisfied. For I was determined to remove all doubt

from Aloha's mind—determined that she should have a marriage ceremony which she could accept beyond the shadow of a doubt.

“ ‘This is a time fit for forgiveness,’ says the clergyman. ‘It is not too late to repair the ravages made in trust and love, as this solemn compact before God has repaired the wrong.’

“He looks from one to the other, but Aloha turns her face and lays her lips upon the brow of her child. Allan Love stands with folded arms, looking at his newly-made wife, then at the clergyman, at the sheriff, at me. At last he breaks into wild, disdainful laughter.

“ ‘What a farce ! Is it quite finished ?’ and he looks with mock entreaty at me. ‘Have I your permission to retire ?’

“ ‘My part in the scene is completed,’ I answer.

“ ‘Then I may conclude that mine is, too. Gentlemen, good night.’

“He opens the door, that smile like a mocking devil's still upon his lips.

“ ‘Sidney Raritan, I have a word for you in private,’ he says, and I follow him.

“The wind sighs round the dilapidated house, the baby's cry mingling with it eerily, as for the last time I stand face to face with the man who hates me.

“ ‘I have only one thing to tell you. It is this: The time may come when our positions may be reversed—’

“ ‘Never !’ I interrupt. ‘Don't speak of what you don't understand. What do you know of honesty, of self-respect, of truth ? I can never stand where you do to-night.’

“A sneer curls his lips, and again he laughs.

“ ‘You think you know me well,’ he says. ‘You think you understand me. I tell you I shall surprise

you yet. Oh, you are successful now. You have the whip-hand; you have made me eat humble-pie to-night. But if at any time in the future you find yourself ruined, body and soul, look for the hand of Allan Love, and you will find that it has crumbled the edifice of your life about your ears. I don't know how yet. I don't see my way clear now, but I can wait; and we are told that the waiting ones at Fate's door are always successful.'

"That white face, those teeth flashing in a distorted smile, those somber eyes, heavy with hate, they rise before me like a ghostly face patterned upon the air.

"He strides from my side toward the cart, and is driven away through the whirling snow. I have never seen him since.

"A fortnight later I stand at the nearest railway station, wishing Aloha good-by, believing she is bound for her father's home, and a good woman as nurse is with her. Imagine my surprise when, a few days later, I receive this note :

" 'DEAR, DEAR SID: You have done for me all that one human being could do for another. I will never forget it, never ! Thank God I am married, and that my child's portion will not be shame. What I have to say now will surprise you. I cannot go back to my father, to my old home. A great gulf yawns between me and the old life. I have written to my father, and this time I am really going to New York, where I shall begin life anew for my child's sake. I have enough money of my own to make me independent of the man whose hated name I bear. When I am settled I shall send my address to you and to my family. Until then good-by.

" 'God bless you, my dear, dear friend. If I yet make something of my life, remember the credit will be to you.

" 'Farewell.

ALOHA.'

"This letter I received months ago. Since then I have heard from Aloha's father that she had gone to England. One thing I am sure of, that Allan Love is as one absolutely dead to her.

“And of him! They say he is dead! It is hinted that I murdered him. As solemnly as if death awaited me the next moment, I swear that I have never seen him since the night he left me in the snow outside Aloha’s dwelling.

“They may question and suspect me. To the end I will be silent about the events of that wild, never-to-be-forgotten night—for Aloha’s sake.

“No one dreams that she held a nameless babe to her heart before Allan Love was forced to call her wife, and no one shall ever know from me—while I live. But I leave this truthful record for Vida Hetherford.

SIDNEY RARITAN.”

He folded it, and sealed it in an envelope, with this written upon its face :

“To be opened by Vida Hetherford in case of my death or mysterious disappearance.

SIDNEY RARITAN.”

It was almost three o’clock before he fell asleep, and his last thought was :

“Vida—love—I shall see her to-morrow.”





CHAPTER VI.

And while Sidney slept, two scenes were being enacted that were bound to have an influence upon his future life.

In the House by the River the lights were still burning, as they so often burned far into the gray dawn. For what was day or night to the man who was letting his life drift by there?

The shaded lamp in the somber study had a cheerful effect upon the dismal place, and before it Mr. Fairleigh sat, his shrouded hands clasping his knees. The whole form was covered by the friar's robe that was so complete a disguise. He was waiting for some one and waiting impatiently.

"Don't yuh want anything to eat, mas'r?" asked old Remus, putting his white, woolly head in. "I got a nice supper heah. There's waffles and a bit of boiled fish you'd smack youah lips after, to say nuthin of a cup of Turkish coffee you're always in trim for."

"Bring the coffee, nothing else. Perhaps Mr. Griggs will be hungry. Keep the rest hot for him."

"All right, mas'r, but so much coffee without food, ain't good for yuh—no, 'tain't," and mournfully shaking his head, he retreated.

"Three o'clock. He was to have been here by one," came from Mr. Fairleigh's lips, as, going to the window, he drew the heavy curtain aside and looked out.

"But perhaps something important detains him—perhaps to leave in time to keep his appointment with me might make him lose some valuable information. Ah, that's more important. I ought to be willing to wait."

He strode away from the window, muttering to himself :

"And to think that I can never dare look in Raritan's face again. Never dare say to him, as he stands before me, with every hope crushed, his life a tomb : 'You see I have kept my word and ruined you.' This revenge is all I live for. Oh, may it be sweet !"

But all reflection died, and he lifted his head eagerly, like an animal which scents blood, as a knock sounded on the door.

Into the rosy half-light came Theodore Griggs, his sharp eyes fastened upon the strange employer he served.

"You are late ! Why ? Did—did he detain you ?" asked Mr. Fairleigh.

"Not consciously," was the grim answer. "I didn't know but that he might leave town at midnight, so I waited opposite his windows until I saw his light go out."

"He is in New York—asleep at this moment, I suppose ?"

"Yes, I could swear to it."

Old Remus entered with the supper, which Mr. Griggs did full justice to, and when it was over and he had lighted a cigar, he began to talk.

"The man whom you suspect—or hate—or whatever it is—is a mighty fine-looking fellow."

"Yes, he was always handsome," came the unwilling reply. "He seems happy—successful ? Tell me all ! Describe him to me ! Don't you see how eager I am ?"

There was something cruelly revengeful in his voice, and a shiver of aversion crept over Griggs.

Then followed a recital of the events of the night. Griggs had indeed been a good watcher. And he had used his tongue, as well as his eyes and ears, for every one that might know anything of Sidney Raritan's past, present or future had been questioned closely.

As he sat beside the mysterious figure in the room lit by the wood-fire, he sketched Vida Hetherford, the fair young girl Sidney loved; he told of the return of Clyde Hastings, and at the name a cry of delight fell from Mr. Fairleigh's lips.

"Clyde Hastings? And you say that he, too, loves Vida Hetherford?"

"Yes."

"Well, he'll win, or make Sidney Raritan rue the day he ever saw his face!" he hissed.

"You know him, then?"

"Yes, I know him."

The conversation between Sidney and Clyde in Bryant Park, where Griggs had been listening, was also given.

"Say that again—again!" was the hoarse reply. And in his excitement Mr. Fairleigh laid his hand, shrouded in its sleeve, upon the detective's shoulder.

A chill struck him. Good Heaven! What sort of a creature was this man he was serving? What was his secret? There was something strange about the hand that rested on his shoulder. It seemed dead. No warmth came through the cloth.

Griggs swayed uneasily from the touch, and the man moved away.

"Tell me again he accused Raritan of murder," came the voice from beneath the cowl.

"Yes, of murdering a man named Allan Love. Rari-

tan denied it. I think it's all gammon myself. Raritan doesn't look like that sort."

This was received in silence.

"That's all," said Griggs. "I know that Raritan made some sort of an appointment with Mrs. Hetherford at her carriage. Do you intend to prevent his marriage with her?"

A laugh of delight and cruelty came to the detective through the firelight.

"Not for worlds. Let him marry her; the sooner the better. Oh, yes, the sooner the better," he said, gloatingly.

* * * * *

There was another man whose thoughts were busy with Sidney Raritan on this June night.

It was very late when Clyde Hastings reached his hotel. His face was white and grim, marked by a fierce determination.

As he entered his room his valet handed him a telegram, and, after reading it, it fluttered to the ground, a stifled curse leaving his lips.

"What hard luck! If he had arranged the whole matter with Fate he couldn't have fallen ill at a more infernally inconvenient time. Uncle Silas always was a nuisance!"

He picked up the telegram again.

"Uncle Silas is dying. Come at once.

"MINA."

His cousin had sent it. Of course, he was expected to go, and, of course, he must go. Not from affection or duty, but because Uncle Silas was worth ten millions, and Clyde wanted to see him before he died. It was so easy to disinherit a fellow. This is what Uncle Silas might do if his dutiful nephew preferred to lin-

ger in New York instead of making his last farewells properly to him. The old man had a hot temper, and if Clyde failed to go he might be cast off with the traditional dollar.

“But to leave New York now, of all times! If the old man should linger on, and I be kept a prisoner in Virginia, who knows what might happen here?”

He called for brandy, and sat far into the night, his brow frowning, his lips set tensely.

What burning thoughts racked his heart, thoughts of Vida, as her imagined face, in all its seductive beauty, rose before him, her eyes so like black pansies, her rosy lips!

To go away and let Sidney Raritan have the field to himself! It was more than madness. And yet what could he do?

But, yes—there is one thing. He could open her eyes to the truth. A light leaped to his clouded face, and his breath came quickly.

“By Heaven, I’ll try it!”

Ere he flung himself down to try and sleep for a few hours, before taking the early train South, he left a letter addressed to Vida Hetherford, and a telegraphic message to Felix Love.

The telegram said:

“Come to New York at once. I have found your father’s murderer.”

Both were to be sent in the morning.





CHAPTER VII.

BESIDE THE SEA.

Vida was ready for her drive along the sands. In white, with just a touch of black at throat and wrists, a big, white hat shadowing her exquisite face, as the shady hats immortalized by Gainsborough shaded the faces of the beauties in olden time, she was indeed a fair picture.

Over sea and land a soft, evening haze lay. The waves trembled in waning crimson. It was the hour for romance, for rapture, for love.

Vida looked intently and seriously into the mirror, as she gave the last touches to the lace at her throat.

"He does love you—he does love you!" she said, the softest, tenderest pink rising in the satiny pallor of her cheek. "You are a very lucky young woman, Mrs. Hetherford—very lucky. Sidney is going to reveal his heart to you to-night. Can you believe it? How is it you can look so calm, although your pulses are capering like mad things? He is coming to-night, sooner than he said—sooner!" And drawing a telegram from her bosom, she kissed it in a shy, intense way that told, better than words, just what havoc Sidney's searching, dark-blue eyes had made with her heart.

She swept from the room, her fleecy draperies send-

ing out the faintest, subtlest odor of violets, as she went with her own graceful, loving eagerness down the stairs.

Outside the door of the pretty cottage a small footman stood beside a light dog-cart, his hand on the bridle.

"I shall not need you to-day, Thomas," she said, as she stepped in and took the reins.

Oh, how delicious it was to trot along in the tender, evening light, the sea on one hand, far-reaching, mysterious, cruelly beautiful, the oddly-shaped summer cottages, in which the lights were beginning to twinkle, on the other.

Every turn of the wheels brought her nearer to the man she loved so passionately, and the surge of the waves, the trot, trot of the horse's feet wove themselves into a haunting melody.

"Oh, my dear—my dear ! He is coming—he is coming !"

But her elation sank a little as she came face to face with Sidney at the station.

The ravages of unrest had left their marks upon his features. He was pale, and the expression in his eyes was intensely thoughtful as he gazed at Vida as if seeking to imprint upon his memory every detail of her charming, changeful face.

They scarcely uttered a word beyond short, glad greetings, ere Vida turned her horse's head homeward from the station.

"Are we going to your cottage now ?" asked Sidney, and the light touch of his hand upon her own sent her blood in stinging currents around her heart.

"Yes ; aren't you hungry ?"

"No, no ! Let us drive on by the sea for a little way. This delicious crimson haze will last for so long.

When we are alone, with sea and sands and sky—there is something I want to tell you.”

Her cheeks were flushed with happiness as they drove on together, understanding fully the yet unspoken love ; and at length, as a huge boulder came in sight, apart from houses, and with the lonely sea beating its refrain against the ragged stones, Sidney quietly took the reins from her.

“Fortunately, that unused bathing-post is convenient, and I can tie the horse there, while we get out and walk a little. Shall we ?”

“Delightful !”

It was so hard to talk when her heart was throbbing madly.

They paced along the sands marked by waving lines as the tide encroached ; the sunset heavens, with here and there a great star glittering in its hush like watchful eyes ; the shuddering, tenderly-tinted sea, the silvered sands, seeming all part of a beautiful dream to Vida, and she almost feared the words that would break that spell.

She was so happy ! Perhaps never again could she be quite so happy. Now she was confident, peaceful. She knew Sidney loved her ; there was no sting, no jar. What if it were the delicious prelude to an awakening, perhaps ? For love, as she well knew, even love at its best, walks never free from heart-burning and suspense and fears.

In the years to come there would be love, but there would also be small sorrows in its wake—death, perhaps, the anguish of necessary partings—all the trail of events that crowd life.

Ah, that happy moment in the crimson hush by the sea ! How often in the days and nights of suspicion, anguish, terror, she recalled it with vain yearning ;

how often in sleep it came to her, only to make more bitter the real morning !

Sidney's vibrant, magnetic voice, heavy with love, broke on her musings and dispelled them.

"Vida dear, is there any need of words between us two ? Do you not know all that is in my heart ? How love is welling there for you, and has almost from the first moment I saw your face ? I love you, Vida—I love you !"

His face above her was pale and set, and not even the sunset light could rob it of its pallid intensity.

Something in the dark, shadowy eyes smote her heart—there was more than passion here—there was agony—there was gloom !

With a yearning cry, she flung out her arms and they closed around his throat ; her soft cheek rested tenderly upon his.

"Sidney, my heart is yours—yours always ! You are my life—my world ! I have no wish, no thought, that is not woven with love of you !" and her passionate whisper swept his soul as a breeze wakes music from a harp.

"My darling Vida !" he said, tenderly, drawing her to his breast and kissing her.

Then he suddenly held her away and looked deeply into her eyes, as if he would search her very soul.

How beautiful she was ! Oh, the light in her deep, dark eyes, the exquisite tenderness and changefulness of lips and glance ! What a fitting picture for her—the sobbing sea, the pink, twilight hush, the glamour of summer on every breeze !

And, oh, the anguish of the coming parting ! How it racked Sidney Raritan's heart ! To be on the very threshold of happiness and to have to pass it by for weary months, perhaps for years !

"There is something else, dear," he muttered in a broken tone ; and across Vida's eyes a shadow flitted.

"Some bad news, Sidney? Oh, yes—yes! I have felt it from the moment you stepped off the train. What does it mean? Ah, my intuition was right—you do not look so pale, so sad, for nothing. What is it, dear? Now I must share every sorrow, every grief you know, just as if I were your wife, as I soon shall be."

"Soon?" he echoed, drearily. "Ah, no Vida, not soon, dear!"

"What do you mean?" and her voice trembled, her eyes darkened. "You are not going away, are you? You don't mean that we must be parted? Oh, darling you don't mean that?"

"For awhile, yes," and there was a pang in Sidney's heart. "I cannot tell you why, Vida. You must believe in my truth and honor without proof, or we must part forever to-night. You must believe that I would not leave you if the matter that calls me away were not more important than my life."

"Oh, what can it be?" came in a little, stifled cry from the beautiful lips so near his own. "Your face tells me that you have suffered. What can it be? You did not look so the night you said good-by to me at the stage door. Sidney, Sidney, I cannot let you go!"

"There, there, darling," and his fingers wandered caressingly over her hair. "You must be brave, or I shall forget all for you. That must not be. I have to go. There is one thing I wish you would do for me. My sister Bebé graduates from the school she has been at in Ottawa very soon, and I expect her in a week or so. Before—before the necessity for my going away arose, I had intended to have her stay with me until we were married. But now I ask you to let her live

under your roof until I return. You will like Bebé, I am sure. She's a bit wild, but lovable, and very pretty. I shall stop and see her at the school before I leave for the West. This will not trouble you too much?"

She gave him a slow, reproachful glance: her arms fell heavily to her sides.

"You know it will not," she said quietly, almost coldly, while in her heart there pulsed one burning thought: "I will not let him go. Anything but that. Oh, God help me to keep him! If he leaves me now, I feel that I shall never see him again—never."

Sidney could see that her face had altered—it was like a gray mask, her features rigid. She moved slowly, languidly to the great, gray boulder by the fretting sea, and, sinking down upon it, stretched her arms out and hid her face upon them.

Sidney was beside her in a second.

"Vida!" he commenced; but she interrupted his pleading, and gently pushed him back.

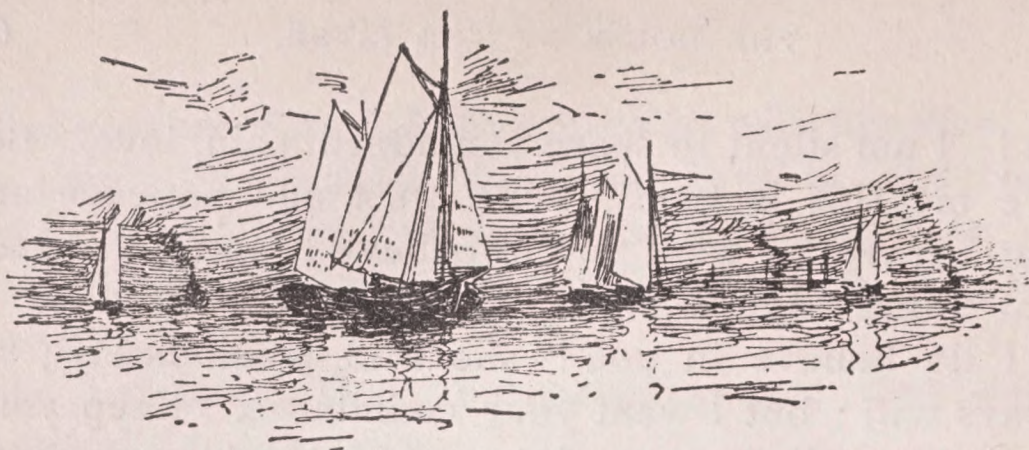
"No, no! There is no use. I know what you would say," she said, bitterly. "You love me—you have won from me a confession of my love—and now, manlike, you shut me out from your heart and confidence. You tell me you must go away for an indefinite time, and you will not tell me why. You will have all the excitement of change, the eagerness in your mission, whatever it is, and I will remain alone, eating my heart out, not knowing your interests, and in terror always of the unknown, the mystery surrounding you. It is cruel to me to do this—it is bitterly cruel, and most unjust," she said, a dry sob in her voice.

"Don't say that, Vida!" came in a harsh breath from Sidney's lips. "What if it is something that, if you knew—would make you think—no, I cannot tell

you ! I am silent to spare you added pain, love. Believe me, this is true. Your trust and patience are what I crave. I want you to believe in me, no matter what comes—and to wait.”

“I do believe in you !” she said, passionately ; “I always will ; but I want your confidence. Keep your secret from all the rest of the world, but let me share it—for I should be as your very self, with no interests apart from you—your sorrows mine as well as your joys.”





CHAPTER VIII.

THE CRY OF A HEART.

For a moment there was a heavy silence between them, while the waves sobbed almost like a human voice and the red in the west changed to a glow like that which comes from a dying fire.

Could he tell her?

This was the thought that tortured Sidney Raritan. He felt her persuasion so strongly, her power over him was so great, that once let him break the silence about Allan Love, and might she not win from him the whole story of Aloha's marriage?

Of this he had sworn never to speak. He had sworn it to his own soul, to Mr. Brysdale and to Aloha.

Better silence altogether than that that old story should be poured even into Vida's ear.

He turned impulsively and took her cold hand, crushing it passionately in both of his.

Ah, whatever the secret, no matter how deep his silence, he truly loved her. Vida saw that, as again her prayerful eyes met his.

"Ask me what questions you will, Vida, and I will answer those I can," he said, tenderly. "The secret is not all my own, else I would share it with you."

With a woman's intuition, she knew from the accent of her lover's voice that somehow or other there was a woman in the case. She knew then, too, how madly jealous she could be of what she loved. Oh, the poignant twinge that pierced her heart like a poisoned needle! A fire seemed to mount to her brain, her fingers grew cold and trembled, the sunset picture of sky and water swam dizzily before her eyes.

"No," she said, icily, as she rose and looked down on Sidney; "I shall not put you through a set of questions as if you were a school-boy and I your mentor! Preserve your silence intact. Go, as you have said. Better that than a half-hearted allegiance and confidence. You will not forget me more surely than I shall *make* my heart forget you!"

"Forget you? Vida, are you dreaming?" he asked, as he started up.

"No, I have been, but I am awake now. We understand each other. You love me in a sort of way—not altogether—not very much," and her proud, short upper lip was lifted in a light disdain. "I want no such love. We will forget our vows, Sidney. Fortunately, they were not very many."

She started to walk past him to the dog-cart, but he seized her hands almost roughly, and compelled her to look at him.

His level, dark brows met in a frown of pride and pain above his eyes flashing so sternly. He was masterful, strong and just. As he held her hands against her will, and looked at her with his deep, half-angry, wistful eyes, she loved him better than in a tenderer mood.

"It is you who are unjust! I will not believe you mean what you say! You give me up easily, but I shall be stubborn and hold you to what you have said. You love me—me, and some day you will marry me—if we both live."

"No! When you return to tell me all, it will be too late. I am wrong, perhaps—wayward and unreasonable as women so often are—but if you go away now, I feel that I will do something foolish—desperate! I might even marry some one else, just to hurt you, even if I crucified my own heart."

As the last words left her lips, she broke into passionate sobbing, and flung herself upon his breast.

"Oh, Sidney, stay with me! I need you! Nothing could matter to such love as mine!"

"Nothing?" he asked, slowly.

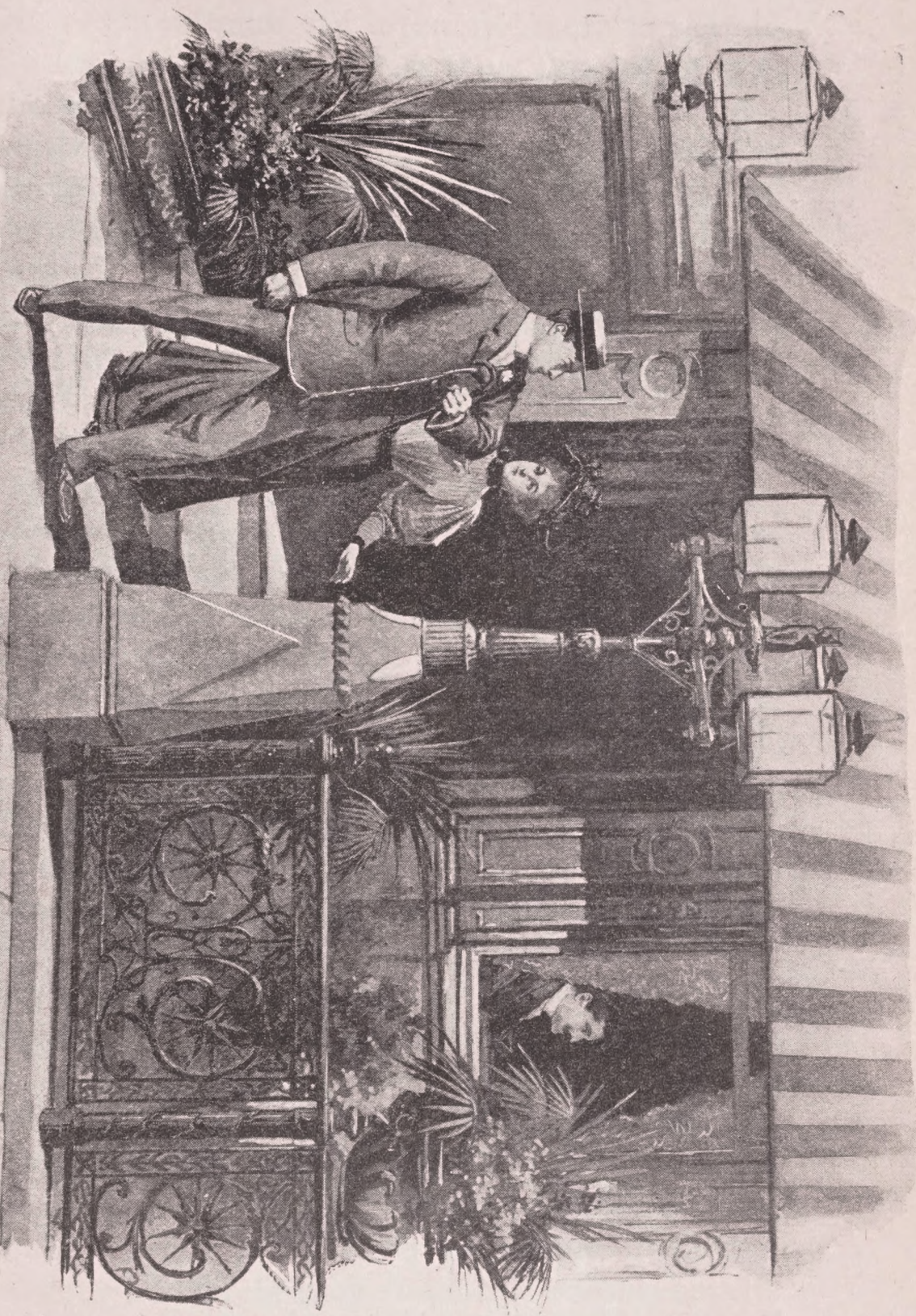
"Nothing, unless—unless—" and her eyes darkened, "you had been playing a double part all these months—and some other woman was bound to you," she faltered.

"It is not that. I was as free as that sea-gull yonder until I met you. But what if I tell you that I have been charged with a treacherous, dishonorable action?"

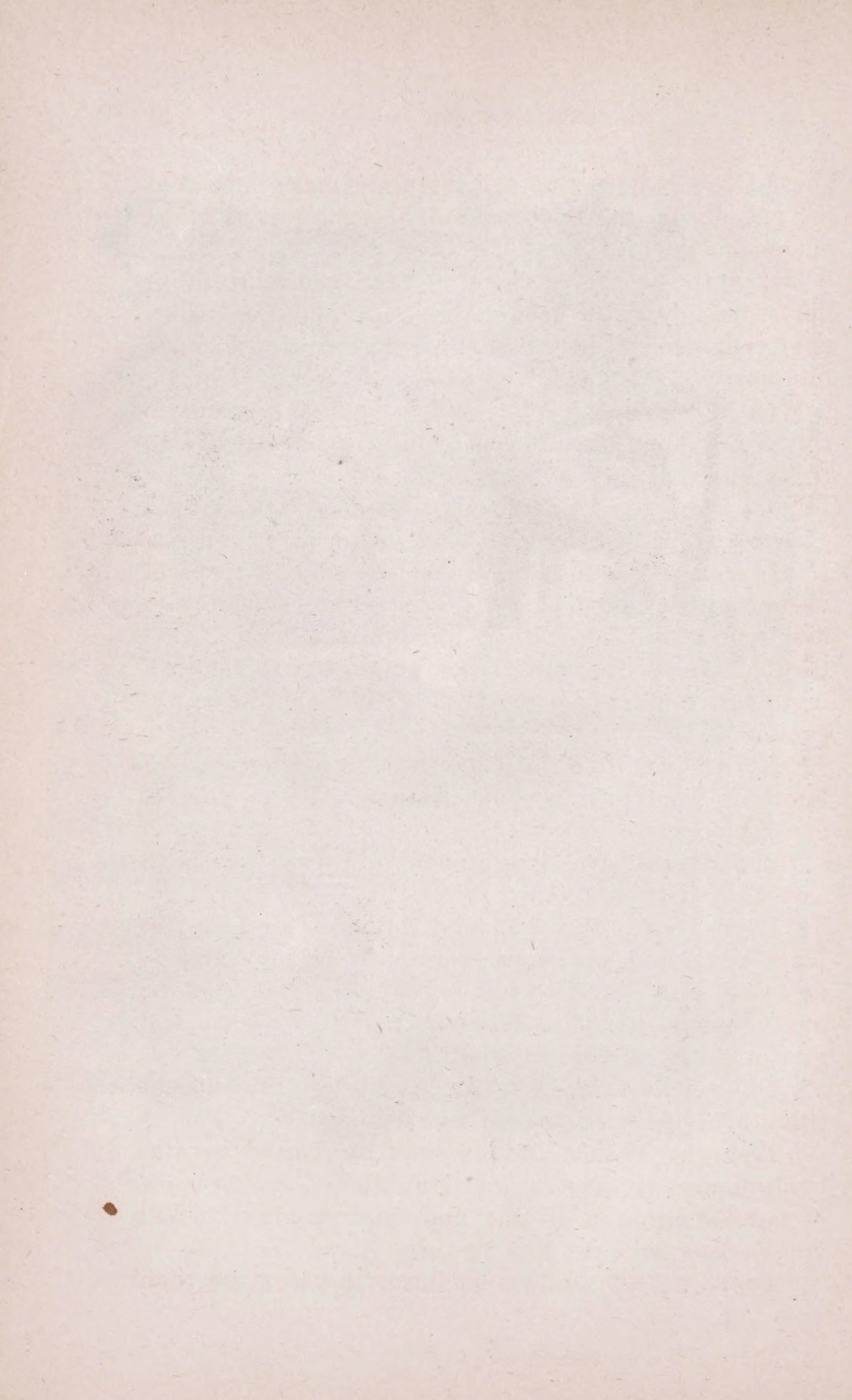
"Is it true? I ask, although I know it cannot be. Sidney, is it true?"

"It is not true."

"Then I care no more for it than for the fading marks of the tide on the sand. Oh, Sidney, don't go away, filling your life and mine with unhappiness, all because of a false charge. Stay and face everything—*anything*! Since you are innocent, the keenest stabs of your enemy must be futile. What guilt might touch you, let it touch me. Should that ever occur, perhaps then you might tell me all, and I could help



‘YOUR BROTHER!’ CAME AT LAST FROM FELIX’S WHITENED LIPS. ‘IS HE YOUR BROTHER?’—See Page 78.



you. Oh, yes, a woman can often do more in searching and unraveling knotty points than the sagest lawyer in the world."

Her enthusiasm, her flashing eyes, the warmth of her arms, now close around his neck, and the knowledge that after all his mission might be fruitless, made him hesitate.

What if she spoke truly, and it would be better to rely firmly upon his innocence, and trust to chance to right him?

"Oh, Vida, you break down all my resolutions by a glance—a word. I long to stay with you, as you ask, I love you so—I do love you so," he said, in tones of deep, repressed passion, as he strained her suddenly to him and kissed her with a warmth and longing that thrilled her to the core of her heart. "Are you willing, dear, to take me on faith? Will you never regret it?"

"Never," she said, in a low, thrilling whisper. "I know my heart. It is yours, Sidney. I love you. I can say no more."

His saddened eyes brightened and a new enthusiasm flashed from them.

"Then I shall throw a lance at fate. If I stay in New York and wait until your year of mourning is up, God only knows what horrid plans may not be afoot to separate us. Will you marry me soon and give a shrug to conventionalities?"

"Oh whenever you say! Anything—but do not think again of leaving me!" she whispered.

"To-night?" asked Sidney, and he waited breathlessly for her answer. "To-night, and no one to know of our intention until the knot is firmly tied? Will you, darling, will you?"

"To-night," she said; and surely it was more than

that last streak of gold plunging for a farewell glance from a purple cloud that softened the velvety deeps of her dark eyes.

She felt no fear of the future. The mystery Sidney had hinted at seemed less than a shadow to her. He would be hers, she his, and, loving each other as they did, it would be strange indeed if they could not defy the traducers and accusers who might try to part them.

A cozy, delightful dinner, *tête-à-tête*, followed at the bride's cottage, the light from the shaded candles falling on her lovely face and making her cheeks out-rival the American beauty-roses heaped in the middle, her lips the scarlet buds that fringed it. She was adorable, queenly ; and as he gazed at her Sidney forgot the shadow that lay over the fate of Allan Love, who, according to report, was last seen alive with him—forgot Clyde Hastings and his burning threats.

It was to be their wedding night, and the suddenness of it, the informality of it, was far more delightful to him than any ceremony arranged on conventional plans.

"Get ready at once, darling," Sidney whispered as they left the table.

Would Vida's heart ever thrill again as it did that night when she stood before her mirror, arraying herself for her sudden bridal ?

Her eyes were dark wells of light, made shadowy and velvety by her great happiness. Her lips were like fresh rose-leaves.

She should wear no black to-night—not the smallest touch. Adieu to those false signs of a woe she never felt, and, with them, adieu to every memory of the bitter past.

Sidney's wife ! Oh, how she loved him !

She thought of the snowy winter night when he had found her, maddened by fear and pain, shuddering at her own door—a shivering outcast where she should have been unquestioned mistress. She thought of his dear eyes, his voice, and her heart throbbed with a rapture beyond words. He had saved her from despair that night, perhaps from death, that she might love him.

“I loved him then,” she thought, as she fastened a spray of white hyacinths at her throat—“I loved him then, and will forever. He talks of enemies, of secrets. I know he is true; so what matters the rest? I would die for him.”

Sidney was waiting in the richly toned square hall for her, and surely there never was aught more lovely than Vida as she came toward him down the stairs in her spotless white draperies.

“A letter for you, madame,” said a pretty French maid, appearing with one upon a salver.

As Vida lifted it carelessly, and tore the edge of the envelope, something familiar in the handwriting caught Sidney’s eye.

He laid his hand lightly on Vida’s and she looked at him, faintly surprised.

Surely his face was paler.

“Do you know the writing?” he asked, and his voice was dry.

“Why, let me see. No, I can’t say I do,” she said lightly.

“I do,” he answered, and his hand tightened its hold on hers.

“Well, what of it, Sidney? Who is it from?”

“Vida, do not read that letter—now,” he said, drawing her to him and looking deeply into her eyes.

“Why not?”

"I cannot tell you. You see, dear, this is the first time I must ask you to trust me blindly. There may be others. I did not dream I should have to make that request so soon—but I must. Vida, do you love me enough—can you—may I pray of you to give me that letter without your having read one word of it?" he asked, and there was something proudly appealing in his glance.

She hesitated, a little frown on her white brow, a look of pain deepening in her eyes.

"Must this mystery stand between us, Sidney? May I not know all?" she prayed.

"Remember your words on the beach. You said you would take me on faith. I know who has written that letter to you. I can almost tell what is in it. It is a lie—a cruel, devilish, despicable lie from beginning to end. Read it, if you like; but if you trust me as you said you did—"

"Yes, Sidney; if I loved you what would I do?" she asked, suddenly softened again by the voice she could not resist.

"You would refuse to read it—and believe in me."

At the words she tore the letter into a hundred pieces and, going to the window, flung them out seaward. The wind caught them up and carried them out to the ocean wastes, like a flotilla of white butterflies.

So Clyde Hastings's stabs at a man's honor failed miserably. His journey to Virginia would not have been so pleasant could he have witnessed that short scene between love and distrust in Vida's cottage.

And, oh, that drive under the moonlit sky, along a beach that was surely made of molten silver!

What words of love and promises of faith and hap-

piness were whispered, as Vida Hetherford drove on by her lover's side !

Oh, night of witchery and delight, ending fitly in the sweet, rapturous, solemn scene in the clergyman's tiny parlor, where they two, alone, knelt hand in hand and heard the solemn, sweet words :

“Until death do ye part !”

Life holds many happy moments, but never such a moment as this.





CHAPTER IX.

BEBÉ.

"Antoine!"

It was Clyde Hastings who spoke, and his valet appeared, bowing obsequiously.

"Yes, monsieur."

"You are sure," his master asked, with a frown, "that these are all the letters which have come for me during my absence?" and he tossed aside a heap of bills and invitations.

"That is all, positively, monsieur."

"No visitors other than these?" and he glanced contemptuously at a number of cards on the salver.

"None others, monsieur."

The frown deepened on Clyde Hastings's brow.

"Think again, Antoine. Was there no—lady—here to see me while I was away?" he asked, slowly.

"Not one, monsieur. I am positive."

"You can go. Yet—wait. Should a gentleman call here this morning and give you the name 'Mr. Felix Love,' show him in here without waiting, and after that say I am not at home, no matter who calls."

"Yes, monsieur."

"So Vida has paid no attention to my letter?" Clyde said aloud, when he was alone. "Surely what I said must have awakened her curiosity. She can't be such

a fool as not to know that I would not dare accuse her lover of murder unless I had good proof of what I say."

There was a settled, fierce thirsting for revenge in the expression of his eyes as he strolled to the window and looked down at the glittering vista of Fifth Avenue, sparkling in the early sunlight of that vivid July morning.

His heart was aflame with love for Vida, the woman who could look so coldly on him, while her heart thrilled so gladly to another man's touch.

What if she had dared to let his accusations and warning pass unheeded? What if his poisoned shafts had failed?

"If she defies me, and if Sidney Raritan holds her confidence in spite of all, I'll make her heart bleed for it!" he muttered.

The forced inactivity of the summer days in town was maddening to Clyde Hastings. He had been back from Virginia a week, and no amount of questioning or search could tell him what had become of either Sidney Raritan or Vida.

The cottage at Narragansett was closed for the time being. None of the society papers had an inkling of their movements, nor had they taken any of their friends into their confidence.

"It looks queer—very!" he mused. "Perhaps she has determined to spend this summer romancing with him without letting him dream that I have warned her, and when she receives news of my return, from the papers, will come and face me, to make me substantiate my claims. Good! I wish I could feel positive of this—and, oh, that Felix Love would come! He is to be my trump card. He is young—I'll mold him—I'll bend him to my will—I'll fill his mind with doubts—I'll make him the weapon in my hand!"

"Mr. Felix Love!"

It was Antoine who spoke, and Clyde turned hastily, a deep stain of excitement mounting his dark cheek.

Yes, there was Felix Love, the big, handsome, clear-eyed fellow, whose manly figure and air made him look somewhat older than his twenty-two years.

"Good-morning, Mr. Hastings!" and he gripped Clyde's hand fiercely. "Your telegram was sent after me from San Francisco to Canada. I came as soon as I could."

As he spoke he sank into a chair and a troubled, weary expression passed over his handsome face.

"Your news was very sad. It came like a blow to me!" he said in a choked voice. "You see, somehow or other, I always fancied that my father's disappearance would be explained—that he was not really dead. But you say you have found the murderer? *Who is he?*"

The last question was only an eager burning, breath. His eyes of dark hazel flashed with the fire and determination of a young judge. He was clean-shaven, and the lines of his mouth visibly hardened.

"He loved his father, scamp though he was," thought Hastings, with a delighted heart-throb. "He'll make a good enemy."

After that he started to win Felix Love's confidence and liking.

"You must be tired. Let's have some iced wine, and then we'll talk the matter over," he said, as he went out of the room to speak to Antoine.

The moment Felix was left alone, he started up and commenced to pace restlessly to and fro.

"What a brute I am to be able to think of love or a girl's face at such a time as this, when I am to learn something of my poor father's fate—I am to stand face

to face with the assassin who struck him down—and still, I *can* think of her !”

Over his handsome, manly face a faint color spread, and he drew a small photograph from his pocket.

No need to ask if he loved the original of it. His eyes mirrored his heart's devotion, and his strong, slender hand trembled as he held the piece of paste-board where the light fell upon it.

It was the face of a very young girl, laughing, saucy, dimpled, the eyes flashing a pretty defiance from beneath the shadowy brim of a big, rose-trimmed hat.

One glance at it told that she was a little coquette—a creature of sunshine, laughter, and pretty, teasing ways.

Underneath it, in a big, dashing hand, was penned one word : “ BEBÉ.”

Felix's dark eyes rested as questioningly on that name as on the riant face.

“ Who are you, Bébé ? Little tyrant ! Beautiful, teasing mystery—will I never see you again ? To think that I know no more about you than your first name and the fact that you are somewhere in New York. Bébé ! What a pretty name ! I love it—and I love you, too.”

“ Who is she, Felix ?” asked Hastings at his shoulder.

He had approached so noiselessly that the young fellow had no idea of his having re-entered the room.

“ There, don't be offended—I didn't mean to pry into your secrets. It was admiration that overmastered me ;” and he laid his hand on Felix's arm.

At the last words, uttered so emphatically, Felix felt his heart glow.

“ She is lovely— isn't she ?” he cried. “ Here, Mr. Hastings, I 'll let you see the picture—I don't mind it. And perhaps you know her ?”

Clyde looked long into the pictured, girlish face.

"I don't know her. Who is she?"

"I don't know."

"Amazing! Where did you find the picture?" asked Clyde in surprise.

"Oh, it's just this way: I didn't find the picture at all. This young lady gave it to me," and Felix flung himself into a chair. "We were fellow-travellers through Canada. We were both coming to New York. There was an accident, and I managed to be able to render her some assistance. If it hadn't been for that delay, I'd have been here a week ago. We were put up at the same farmhouse to recover from the shock. Her injuries were very slight, but I got a sprained foot."

"I see," and Clyde smiled as he handed the iced champagne to Felix. "You got to know each other, fell in love—"

"*I* did! The pretty stranger seemed to like me, and to my many prayers that I might know her name and some day call myself her friend, she left me on the morning of her departure this pretty picture and a note, saying we would in all probability meet in New York. There you are! There's the whole story. She left a few days before I did. Oh, it was maddening not to be able to follow her, but the doctor forbade it. I am ashamed of myself, Mr. Hastings, but I almost forgot the terrible mission which called me to New York in my sudden infatuation of her."

He started up and held out his hand to Clyde. All the softness and tenderness had gone from his face. The eyes were flashing now as revengefully as Othello's, his breath came in quick, choked gasps.

"But I am going to make amends for my weakness. Do not fancy me thinking only of love; do not fancy me unfit for the work of bringing the murderer of my

father to justice." And Felix's clear voice thrilled with passion and grief. "Why, there never was a kinder father in the world than mine was to me. My mother died when I was a little chap. My father was all to me. I have heard people say that he was wicked, and I know he had many enemies; but he loved me, and I'm going to avenge his death. Now tell me who is the man, and what proofs have you?"

"Good!" cried Hastings. "I see that you are the right sort. But I'm not ready to tell you all yet."

"What do you mean? Let there be no delay, for heaven's sake. I have always suspected Sidney Raritan. Is he the man?"

Clyde tried to hide the sudden joy in his cold, gray eyes.

"Why?" was all he said.

"Well, he and my father were not such good friends toward the latter part of their acquaintance as they were in the beginning. Then the night Raritan reached San Francisco from Honolulu my dad was with him. I was then living with my cousins in San Francisco, and, quite by accident, I met dad with Mr. Raritan. They were on their way to the railway station, and seemed trying to get away without being recognized. I asked my father where he was going: 'To the plains. See you soon.' These were the last words I ever heard from his lips. Mr. Raritan was on ahead by this time. I saw him turn and wait for my father. I only had a glimpse of his face."

"Yet you could swear it was he?" And Clyde leaned across the table eagerly, his face sharpened by his longing for revenge.

"Yes, I could swear it. There is not the slightest shadow of a doubt."

"Then there is nothing more to be said. Let him

be arrested on suspicion. As you say, you have waited too long, hoping to hear news of your father." And Clyde brought his fist down on the table. "Now is the time to act."

"Then the man you, too, had in mind is Raritan?" asked Felix, quickly.

"Yes."

"And you have discovered some conclusive proof against him?"

"Well, nothing positive," and Clyde did not look into the frank eyes before him. "Sidney Raritan hated your father; there was some trouble about a woman. That much I have learned. He was the last man seen with your father. Don't you think it's time to arrest him on suspicion? That's the only way the mystery can be unraveled."

"That's true," cried Felix. "Where is he now?"

"I don't know, but I'll find out very soon. Think over what I have said and come here to-morrow. By that time I'll have news of some sort, I'm sure."

A few moments later Felix took his departure. His mind was burning, his thoughts were in a whirl. To think of his father as really dead—murdered in some out-of-the-way ravine, or his body hidden in some still, deep brook—filled his heart with pain.

"Is he dead? Can he be dead? Dad, dad, somehow I cannot feel that I shall never see you again! And yet, all efforts to win a response from you have been in vain. Advertisements, personals, clues followed—all resulted in nothing!" he thought, as he walked down the sunny avenue toward the rooms he had taken.

"Bah! Let me not hesitate any longer. Let me not dream that to-day or to-morrow or in a week he will suddenly come back. I am not worthy to be called

his son if I do not give over hoping and now seek to punish his murderer. Raritan shall tell what he knows, and tell it before a jury, by heaven !”

“ Mr. Love !”

What soft whisper was that, thrilling him to the very depths of his heart ? All thoughts of revenge faded away, and instead a flood of love subdued and almost overpowered him. Was it a dream, or did he see before his eyes the witching face that had enthralled his soul and his senses ?

“ Yes, it is I—Bebé,” she laughed, and how pretty and aristocratic she looked in the pearly summer silk and big rustic hat, her blue eyes like violets blooming in a cool shadow.

He seized her little hand, and surely she could read the love in his voice.

“ I’ve been hoping to meet you every moment since you ran away. May I walk on with you ?” he asked eagerly.

“ No, for I ran out of Delmonico’s when I saw you. Oh, every one there was scandalized when I jumped up. But I couldn’t help it, you looked so—so grumpy. Come in. I was lunching there with my brother and his—but there, that’s a secret. I promised not to tell. Come in, come in ; they must thank you for all you did for me.”

Felix followed her tripping feet gladly, but as they were about to turn into the famous restaurant, he caught sight of a face at the window, and growing as white as the hyacinth in his coat, he fell back a step, his eyes flashing, his mouth hardening into set lines.

“ *Sidney Raritan !*”

The name came in a breath, and he was scarcely aware of having spoken until Bebé stepped back and looked at him in surprise.

“Oh,” and the dimples came out in her cheeks, “you know my brother!”

For a moment Felix seemed stricken dumb; then a questioning horror overspread his face, a look that made the light-hearted girl grow cold with a fear for something ghastly and as yet unknown.

“Your brother?” came at last from Felix’s whitened lips. “Is he your brother?”

“Yes; my name is Bebé Raritan.”





CHAPTER X.

"I SUSPECTED YOU."

Everything seemed to go topsy-turvy, as Felix heard that name from the red, smiling lips of the pretty girl beside him.

"Bebé Raritan !"

Those few syllables, simple and sweet-sounding—how they crashed through the dainty fabric of the dream he had been cherishing—how they chilled his heart and weighed upon his spirit !

Raritan ! Was it not the name he was sworn to hate ? Had he not pledged himself, only a little while before, to cover it with ignominy ?

His impulsive, young heart knew in that one bitter moment what hopelessness and disillusion meant ; and Bebé, glancing at him, was startled by the sudden expression of sadness and despair that glanced at her from his eyes.

But she thrust the feeling from her, and entered Delmonico's doorway.

"Come, don't stand there like a goose !" she said, making a pretty little face. "Sid's the dearest soul, and he'll want to thank you lots—I know he will."

There was nothing to do but follow, and this Felix did like one in a dream.

At a corner table, commanding a view of the sunlit avenue, he saw the man whom he suspected of a

cowardly crime. The sunshine played upon his face, and by very force of contrast he recalled where he had last seen it on that winter night in San Francisco, when in the gleam of the crude gaslight he had caught a glimpse of the stern, handsome features, the set mouth, the clear eyes, dark with an indomitable resolve.

"Can it be true? There is no mark of Cain in that face. And yet the mystery of that night, my father's disappearance, Raritan's silence and sudden journey East! Is there nothing in all this? But, oh, the bitterness of it that he should be her brother—her brother!"

As if they came out of a maze that muffled his senses, he heard Bebé's tones tell the story of their meeting in Canada, heard Vida's soft voice thanking him; but Sidney Raritan sat silent, and Felix suddenly became aware that his eyes were fastened on him as if he would read his very soul.

"Sid, why don't you tell him how brave and good he was?" Bebé whispered, her cheeks glowing like a wild rose, her blue eyes flashing with resentment at her unexplained silence. "Tell him what—er—what a *brick* he was! I might have been killed only for him. How can you sit there and not say a word?"

"I do thank Mr. Love for any kindness and care he showed my little sister," and Sidney's voice was cool, courteous, perfectly self-possessed. "I thank him very much. By the way, Mr. Felix Love remembers that we have met casually now and then in the West?" Sidney asked, determined to learn something of the attitude his enemy's son held toward him.

"Yes, I remember you very well," said Felix; and under the healthy tan of his skin both Bebé and Vida could see how pale he had become.

A reckless daring entered Sidney's heart, and every nerve thrilled with anger.

"So this young fool suspects me, too, does he? He is probably Hastings's cat's-paw—has come on at his bidding to ferret out something he can use against me."

A sarcastic smile curled his lip as he rose and lightly picked up his gloves.

"I believe I last saw you in San Francisco—let me see—one night, a snowy night, about a year or so ago, I think. Yes; of course, I remember now. I was with your father, was I not?"

"Yes," came in a hoarse breath from Felix's lips, and now all the hatred he had felt but a little while before for Sidney rushed over his heart afresh.

He dared speak of that night? He dared smile as he flung that subtle challenge in his face?

His heart seemed to swell to bursting; and only the memory of where he was, and that Bebé's soft, seductively deep blue eyes were fastened upon him, kept him from saying something to express the storm in his soul.

"Oh, yes?" and still the provoking smile deepened on Sidney's lips. "Er—how is your father, by the way?"

Vida saw the young man's eyes flash; his breath came in a labored, repressed way, and when he spoke his voice was ominous, although the words he uttered were commonplace enough.

"Don't *you* know?"

"Haven't an idea! How should I?"

"Then I cannot tell you, as I have not seen my father—*lately*."

By this time Vida had risen, and was looking intently from Sidney to this new acquaintance. She dimly

felt that there was a suggestion in their speech she did not understand.

Her beautiful face was creamy in its pallor, her velvety dark eyes filled with a burning unrest.

"I wonder who he is—this young stranger—Felix Love? I must remember that name! He is handsome, and all his struggles cannot hide from me that he is suffering from some inward excitement. I must watch and solve this mystery. After all, who should know better than I the details of my husband's life? It is cruel to me—cruel!" she thought. "I see him often in deep thought, pale, preoccupied. A chance mention of Clyde Hastings's name makes him start and frown; and now it is evident that this young man from the West knows something of Sidney's past that burns like smoldering embers in the heart of each."

A light touch on her arm made her turn, and she saw Bebé, her pretty face aglow, her ripe lips parted eagerly.

"Ask him to call, Vida. I can see that Sid won't, but you must, for—for I like him. Ask him to call!"

As they turned to leave the restaurant, Vida, looking very queenly in her lustrous, pale-gray draperies, held out her daintily-gloved hand to Felix.

"We are stopping at Mr. Raritan's old family place—Applethorpe, on the Bronx, quite in the city's limits. You must come and see us, Mr. Love, when you have the time or inclination, or both."

"I shall be charmed," poor Felix muttered, while a ghastly sorrow tugged at his warm heart and made him avoid meeting Bebé's eyes.

"Be sure you come," Bebé whispered, and her laughing face, so like one of Greuze's fair heads, was lifted near his own. "Don't you remember at the farmhouse

we said we thought we could be chums? Be sure you come—*soon*."

"Thank you—thank you so much," was all poor Felix could say, as he wrung her hands so that the pretty rings she wore made small indentations on her fingers; but she didn't mind that. No, indeed; she liked the stinging pain his impassioned grasp had left—it was a reminder of him that kept him near her for a good fifteen minutes afterward.

In the meanwhile, Sidney, pale and icily polite in his demeanor, walked by the side of the man he knew was accusing him in his heart.

"Mr. Love," he said, at last, "I want to put Mrs. Raritan and my sister in the carriage and have a talk with you. Is it convenient for you? Or perhaps you have an engagement?"

"It is quite convenient for me," said Felix, coldly.

So Vida and Bebé returned to Applethorpe alone, and Sidney led the way to his club, only a few blocks distant.

The place was almost deserted on this summer afternoon, and they found a room entirely to themselves.

In the shaded place, his face as clear-cut as marble, his eyes burning, Sidney turned slowly and looked Felix Love over from head to foot.

"There are just a few things I want to say to you, if you will have the patience to listen. I don't suppose you'll take one of my cigars, by the way?" asked Sidney.

"No, I thank you," was Felix's reply, as he leaned moodily against the mantel, thinking not of this man he had been told was a murderer, and whom he himself suspected, not of his father's fate, strange though it was, not of Clyde Hastings and the compact they had entered into, but of a girl's face, that somehow had

come to mean to him the whole world and more. Such a winsome, merry, perfect face ! It seemed retreating farther and farther into the shadows that surrounded his life, and far away in a lurid gloom where the knell of murder sounded—he saw it no more.

Bebé must be lost to him ! Fate had said so. A dark story of treachery and death yawned between them. He had come to accuse her brother, and that justice meant that never might he stand with Bebé's hands in his and read the tender confession of her answering love in her eyes.

"Will you answer a few questions?" asked Sidney, as he lit a cigar, and then let its spark die out without once raising it to his lips. "Or, at least, I may presume that if you answer them at all, you will speak truly?"

"I never lie !" flashed from Felix, as he flung up his head, a stain of color mounting to his brow.

"The emphasis on the pronoun is an insinuation that I do, I suppose?"

"I can only speak for myself. I don't answer for any other man," was the independent answer.

"Then will you kindly answer these questions, as they are of importance to both of us? Clyde Hastings sent for you, did he not?" asked Sidney, quietly.

"Yes, he did."

"Before receiving that message from him, had you suspected me of any knowledge of your father's whereabouts?"

For a moment Felix was silent, but his answer came coolly, emphatically :

"I suspected you."

A slight contraction passed over Sidney's brow.

"And you do still, I suppose?"

"Nothing has occurred to make me alter that opinion. Still, I have no positive proof. I only know that

your mysterious errand with my father, which has never been explained, seems strange. If you are an honest man, why don't you speak out?" cried Felix, suddenly forgetting discretion, and letting his temper, which was a hot one, get the better of him. "Why don't you tell where you went that night, and why?"

"My young friend," said Sidney, quietly, suddenly rising and leaning forward across the table that divided them, "I now have your whole opinion of the matter. I know where to place you. I know enough to make it necessary for me to tell you that if you should dare take advantage of the invitation innocently given by my wife and sister this afternoon, I would have you shown the door! Never dare to speak to my sister—never dare to touch her hand while you have this opinion of me. You have chosen to jump at a conclusion which I shall consider too absurd to need a denial. As for my movements on that night or any other, I don't choose to explain them to you or anybody else who comes to me demanding an explanation as a right. Do you quite understand me, Mr. Love?"

Felix looked into the intense, glowing eyes before him, his own face strained and pale.

"You have made yourself reasonably plain, I think. You little know me if you think I would have crossed your threshold or accepted any hospitality from you. As for your sister—your sister—I shall try to forget that we ever met."

How hard it was to choke down the dry sob that came with the words. Try to forget Bebé! What a task he had set himself—what a bitter, hopeless task!

"See that you do," was Sidney's grim answer; and a moment later, after a cool "good afternoon," Felix went away.

For a little while Sidney sat there, the unlit cigar between his fingers, his face troubled, his lips set in a stern, contemptuous expression.

"So the war has begun. I know Hastings of old. What will he do? What can he do? Besmear me in the minds of my friends by his gossip? Suspect me? Set the police to watch me? Well, let him. My life will bear inspection. Until they find Allan Love's body, there can be no charge of murder. In case he has been made away with, I suppose my part of that wretched night's business would bring me under the suspicion of the law."

He started up and commenced to pace up and down the room.

"I sha'n't bother myself, however. I shall keep that night's work secret and safe, and just live my daily life as if I were not an interesting figure watched by a number of amateur detectives. Bah for them all! Silence still—for a woman's sake—for a foolish, loving, unhappy little woman's sake. And now I'm off to put a notice of my marriage to Vida in the papers. We've kept it quiet long enough. What a bitter dose that news will be for Hastings to swallow!"





CHAPTER XI.

AT APPLETHORPE.

It was more than a week later ; a breezy, August afternoon, that presaged a cool, delightful night. The table was set for afternoon tea in the pretty drawing-room at Applethorpe.

Bebé, among the crape pillows, heaped on the low, bamboo couch, was idly swinging her dainty slippered foot to and fro as she watched Vida, so pretty in her cool, white India silk dress, presiding over the spirit-lamp on the oval lace-draped table.

"It's just this way," said Bebé, her pretty forehead gathered in a frown, her blue eyes full of discontent, her soft, curling, gold-brown hair ruffled by the constant movement of her uneasy head : "He doesn't like me, and he doesn't want to know me. My self-esteem tells me he must be a fool to feel this way, as I flatter myself I am worth knowing ; but he doesn't mean to come. Any one with half an eye can see that."

Vida went to her side with a little gold-and-white cup of fragrant Pekoe, in which a bit of lemon in the shape of a half-moon floated, and, smiling in her flushed face, said, merrily :

"Well, my dear, I have a pair of very good, clear-sighted eyes, and I don't see that at all."

"Then why hasn't he come?" demanded Bebé, as if that question settled the whole matter.

"Perhaps he's out of town."

"Well, he shouldn't have gone! If ever a man acted as if he were smitten on a girl, that man was Felix Love. Why, when we were at the farmhouse he scarcely took his eyes off my face; talked of the days when we were to be chums—know each other so well; said there was an affinity between us—and—and—that he could feel it—and all that rot," burst out Bebé, in a mixture of regret and disgust. "And when we fairly knock our heads together on Fifth Avenue, and he has a chance of meeting you and Sid, gets an invitation to call, nearly wrings my hand off, looks unutterable things, he simply disappears—doesn't come near me! He hasn't even been in the neighborhood!"

"Why, how do you know that?" and Vida lifted her level, Greek brows, while her eyes filled with quizzical questioning. "Now, how on earth can you make the sweeping assertion that Mr. Love has not been in this neighborhood? Are you a sphinx, a bit of a clairvoyant, or—you pretty, willful little creature—are you just trying to make yourself as miserable as possible?" and Vida laid her finger under her sister-in-law's chin, and looked deeply and long into the eyes that were so marvelously like Sidney's.

"How do I know?" asked Bebé, slowly, a dimple coming suddenly into her cheek as she sat up, a coquettish mixture of tumbled laces, tumbled bronze-gold hair, her eyes half-ashamed and half-defiant. "Well—just to make a clean breast of it—I've been on horseback up and down the boulevards for hours and hours every day—just—just hoping to catch a glimpse of him; I've walked my feet off; I've kept

my eyes rolling, trying to look both directions at once ; but there hasn't been the ghost of him—*there !*"

She flung her arms around Vida's neck, and, between angry little bursts of laughter and sounds that were suspiciously like sobs, called herself a fool, a creature without pride, and that it would be no wonder at all if Vida hated her, and that she supposed she did.

A tenderness that swept like a veil over Vida's beautiful eyes made them look like great, velvet pansies, as she laid her cool, white hand on the childish head and touched all that was visible of the flushed cheek.

"Dear child, you may tell me ! Bebé—Bebé—do you care for him so much ?" she asked in a whisper that invited a young heart's secret.

There was no answer, no movement, but the half-sad laughter ceased.

"You don't want to tell me ? Well, never mind. But remember, Bebé, remember always that I love you dearly, and that I want you to be happy. Remember a week is a little while to a man whose life is crowded with business details, as your young friend's may be. He will come to Applethorpe yet, I feel sure of it. Besides—I hate to say it—but you know, dearie, he may have been ill—it's been such wretchedly hot weather until this morning."

Bebé looked up, her face all contrition and concern.

"Oh, do you think so, Vida ? Ill ? The poor dear, and I abusing him this way ! Couldn't we find out some way if he were ill, and send him some—some jelly ?" she quavered.

It was hard for Vida to remain properly serious, but she managed it.

"I'll see, dear ; I'll ask Sidney about the jelly."

"Oh, no, no ! Not for worlds !"

"Why not ?"

“Why, couldn’t you see that Sid didn’t like him?”

The words aroused a tormenting doubt, a sense of unrest that of late had tormented Vida.

Was this true? Did Sidney dislike Felix Love? If so, why? What hidden event in the past were they both thinking of that day in Delmonico’s when they were so icily, ominously polite to each other? She had thought at first that this might be her fancy, but since Bebé noticed it, too, it did exist.

For days after that meeting she had tortured herself—for Vida was as jealous as a Spaniard where she loved—she had fretted her heart with questions that gave back no answer.

Then she had remembered that crimson evening by the sea when she had clung to her lover, kept him at her side, promising to trust him blindly, to ask no questions, to believe in the face of all doubts, if he would but stay with her.

Surely that was a compact that no passing suspicion could break down! She had kept him when he would have gone on some vital, secret errand—she had promised to believe in him, and she would.

But a woman’s heart! Is there in life anything more inconsistent, more illogical than that very necessary organ?

Oh, what allegiance to this vow was costing her! Like Fatima, who risked her life to peep into Bluebeard’s secret chamber, passing by all the others without interest, so the question kept haunting Vida:

“What leaf in my husband’s life is turned down to me? What is the secret? Who are his enemies? Who is Felix Love, and what does he know of Sidney’s past? Is the secret shameful for him, or for another? Is it the old story of *cherchez la femme*? Will the shadow ever be lifted from our otherwise perfect love? Shall

I ever know? Will he tell me some day? Will he tell me?"

Before she could reply to Bebé, the footman entered.

"If you please, mum, there's a person here wants to see Mr. Raritan."

"Have you the gentleman's card?"

"No, mum," replied the cockney servant, his chin well up. "This hain't a gentleman—this is a pusson. I think he's come to hengage hissself to Mr. Raritan. He's furrin—I might say that he's French."

"Oh, it's probably the new valet," said Vida, languidly. "I'll see him here, Ruggles."

"Yes, mum, quite so."

He withdrew, and after a moment there entered a funny little man that almost made Bebé laugh outright.

He was a creature of shrugs and grimaces. From the most pointed hair standing upright with pomatum to the tips of his highly polished little boots, he was indeed a Frenchman.

"You have come to see Mr. Raritan in regard to his advertisement for a valet, I suppose?" asked Vida, standing up straight in her slender, regal beauty and looking at the affected little man without a grain of the amusement she felt showing in her eyes.

"A leetle more zan zat. Oh, yes! Meester Rairitan have sent me a lettair to call—yes, madame—and I present myself for hees inspection. So!" And he bowed very low with impressive dignity.

"Ah, indeed! What's your name?"

"Etienne Oudry."

"I suppose you have references and experience?" she asked.

"*Oui certainement, madame. Voila!*" And he plunged into his pocket, keeping his small, pompous

little body bent almost to a right angle as he did so.

"That will do. I merely wanted to know. Mr. Raritan will engage you if you are satisfactory. He may not be home until dinner, but you may stay and see him. Ruggles will take care of you."

She rang the bell, and Ruggles, wearing his most condescending expression, appeared.

"This man comes as the new valet. See that he has dinner with you, if by that time Mr. Raritan has not arrived," she said.

And the Frenchman bowed himself out.

"What a queer-looking man!" said Bebé, with a little laugh. "I say, Vida, you'll never let him curl the front of Sidney's bronze locks that way, will you?"

"You absurd child! For all his affected airs, I shouldn't wonder if he made a splendid servant. These Frenchmen generally do. Have another cup of tea?"

As she settled herself among the pillows Bebé ran from the window and whispered excitedly:

"There's a man just come up the garden walk! I wonder if it might be—he?"

"Dear me! Has it come to pronouns?" laughed Vida. "It's always a bad sign, my dear, when a woman, be she young or old, begins to talk as if there were but one man in the world; that he had no name, being labeled just 'he' in capitals."

There was a step at the door—Ruggles again, this time with a card.

"Mr. Clyde Hastings!"

The delicate color flew to Vida's soft, oval cheek as she read that name. Why did he come uninvited to Applethorpe? She did not like him. She did not want him.

Yet when he appeared, dark, pale, the marks of suffering around his eyes, a faint throb of pity for him did animate Vida's heart. It was love—a vain love for her—that had saddened his face. She knew that. While she had no touch of sympathy with him, this knowledge, now that she was quite happy herself, did lend him some interest in her eyes.

"You did not ask me to come," he said, as he bent over her hand, "but I dared to make my way here uninvited, nevertheless. It is not too late to congratulate you on your marriage, is it?" he asked. And just for a second an expression of agony and bitterness looked from his eyes that thrilled her almost with fear.

"I hope it will never be too late for that," she said, in her mellow, velvety tones; and, turning to Bebé, presented them.

Clyde Hastings's glance swept over the young girl, but it was sphinx-like. No one, to watch him, would ever dream how much he had heard of Bebé from poor Felix during the past week.

"Pretty?" he thought, as he looked at the unlined face, the dreamy, childish eyes of little Bebé. "Well, I suppose so! If you want a complexion of rose and snow, there it is for you; big, blue eyes, with trailing lashes—you have them, too; a dear, rosy, babyish mouth—it's right before you; a round, satiny chin, cleft by a dimple, a fuzz of gold-bronze hair above a low, white brow—yes, dainty Miss Raritan has all these delightful and fortunate gifts. I suppose it's only natural that Felix should have fallen in love with her—the young fool! Love!" he thought bitterly. "As if he was beginning to know what it means in its deepest sense! To know love, one must have suffered until the agony mounts a voiceless protest to heaven, I have loved—I know!"

"You'll have a cup of tea?" asked Vida. "It's Pekoe, fragrant as a rose."

"Thanks, I will."

Tea? As if he would not have drunk poison from those hands almost as willingly.

His haggard eyes watched Vida as she bent over the pretty table, a heap of pink roses on the mantel behind her making an entrancing background for her golden head, pale, cameo-like profile, and graceful, white-robed figure.

"Is Mr. Raritan at home?" he asked, as he took the pretty Wedgewood cup from her hands, while Bebé at the piano in the shaded corner trilled out soft melodies that breathed of love and passion.

"No, he will be in shortly," she said, seating herself; and picking up a big fan, commenced to wave it slowly to and fro.

"I may as well tell you," said Clyde, watching Vida narrowly as he stirred his tea, "that Sidney likes me none too well. But I want to change all that—now that he is your husband! Do you understand?" he asked, passionately, eagerly.

"Hardly," and there was a slight chill in Vida's tone. "I can fancy Sidney being sought for himself alone."

"Ah, well, he is a good fellow! I'm willing to let bygones be bygones, if he is," and he looked down mysteriously at the pattern of the Persian rug at his feet.

"Do you mean that you and he had quarreled? I did not know that."

"We had a few words—when I found—well, to be candid, when I found he was a suitor of yours. I taunted him with something in his past."

He let it appear that the words had slipped out unconsciously, looked down as if in chagrin and confu-

sion, while all the while he noted the stern whiteness that settled around the mobile, curved lips of this woman he loved so madly, so hopelessly.

“In his past !”

The words were like a torrent in Vida's brain. Was this something that she might not know to rise and confront her at every turn ? As much as possible, she hid the knowledge of how deeply his words had cut.

“Please say no more, Mr. Hastings,” and her dark eyes flashed. “What you may have felt for me belongs irretrievably to the past. Even to speak of it as in the past offends me now. As for my husband, please understand that I am quite satisfied with his past and present. His friends are mine ; his enemies mine.”

How beautiful she looked as these cold, scornful words left her lips, and how mournfully the music came from the shaded niche where Bebé sat ! The scene affected Hastings strongly. Villain though he was, there was one real feeling in his life—the love for this woman, that was no more conquered than is the lion which is made a captive by force, who lies silent and brooding merely because he sees no promise of freedom before him.

But Clyde Hastings had come to Applethorpe that afternoon with a well-conceived plan in his mind. He was going to get the *entrée* of the house ; he was going to insinuate his way into Vida's confidence. The time would come when he would be her friend.

Her friend ! The man who would quietly and relentlessly ruin and brand her husband ! Her friend—the snake in her Eden ! He had not despaired yet.

Vida was proud and cold now, but when the world had turned its fickle back upon her, the wife of a convicted murderer, how would it be then !



CHAPTER XII.

“SO CLOSE WE ARE, AND YET SO FAR APART.”

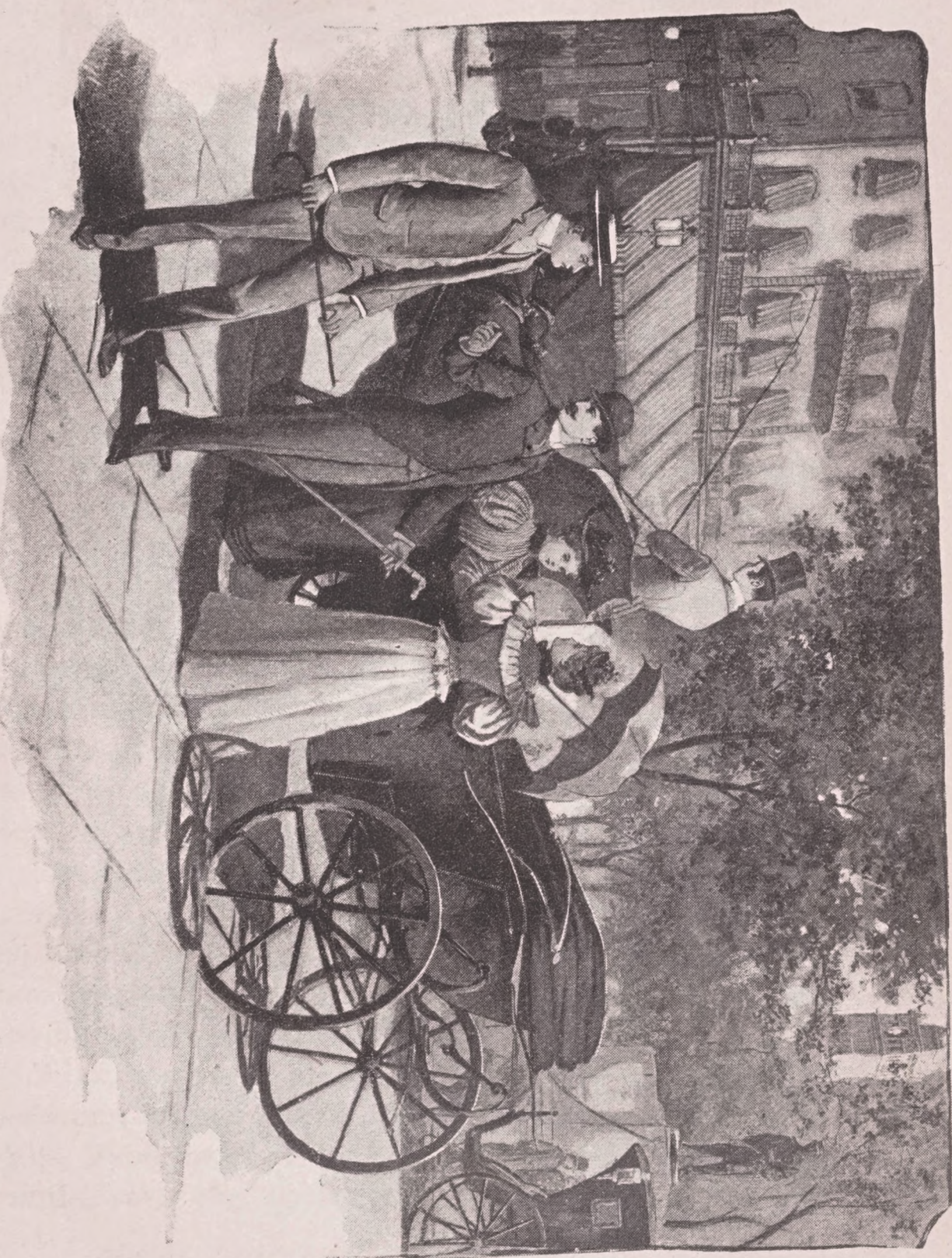
Unnoticed, the music in the corner ceased, and Bebé slipped from the room.

On the terrace, strewn with rugs and easy-chairs, she paused and picked up a big-brimmed hat on which a wreath of honeysuckle nodded.

“They’re gossiping there ; they won’t miss me. I simply can’t stay quiet any longer,” she thought as she ran down the steps to the shelving stretches of grass that glimmered far away under the rows of apple-trees like richly-toned velvet.

It was now on the verge of the summer twilight—a magical hour. Far away there was a suggestion of the smoke from the great city against a sky of glowing crimson, dotted here and there by the white light of an early star. But around Applethorpe there was the coolness and silence of the country. Far up in the pale-blue above Bebé’s head hung the wan ghost of a young moon ; the breeze softly stirred, the trees rustled their leaves in soft whisperings.

How still and inviting the long, green aisles were between the apple-trees ! How the white road gleamed beyond the lodge gates ! How dim and mysterious the



"MR. LOVE, I WANT TO PUT THE LADIES IN THE CARRIAGE, AND HAVE A TALK WITH YOU."—See Page 83.

Woods on the other side looked, stretching away, far away !

Bebé hurried on lightly. Her young heart was aflame with its burden of love. It was delicious to flutter along the white road in the deepening sunset and think and think that Felix would come to-morrow, that there was some reasonable explanation for his continued absence.

Descending a hilly road that led down to low, marshy land, Bébé found herself in the loneliest spot she had ever seen. A small river wound along like a silver snake between long, reedy grasses, and the only house in sight was a low, square building, closely shuttered, the garden a riot of rank weeds.

"Ugh ! It looks haunted, that house by the river. I wonder who lives there ! It seems the very place for a murder, or one of those dreadful houses where wicked people throw poor, insane relatives to die, unknown and uncared for," she thought, preparing to turn her back upon it, when suddenly she stopped, interested. Surely she knew that figure coming so guardedly and stealthily down the path !

She waited until the man came within a few steps of her, then she stepped from the shadow of the tree where she had been idly leaning, and faced him in her uncompromising, school-girl fashion.

"What were you doing in that house ? You don't live there, do you ?" she asked, sternly.

Yes, Bébé had not been mistaken. She was looking straight into the apologetic, restless eyes of the new valet.

"Oh, mademoiselle, you startle me !" he gasped, removing his hat from his oiled hair, his mustache curving upward in a craven smile.

"What have you been doing down there ? Were you

not told to wait in the servants' quarters for Mr. Raritan?" she demanded—for Bebé had been accustomed to authority all her spoiled life, and could look as cool and commanding as a young princess upon occasions.

"True, mademoiselle," shrugged the new servant. "But ze maison was ver' hot. I went to take a walk; I remembered zat ol' pless zare. Once a fren' of mine—a poor, sickly young Englishman, leeve zare. I strolled up ze walk for ze remembrance sake of ze time when we used to smoke in zee little garden."

"H'm! You must have lived a long time in this country," sniffed Bebé, suspiciously. "That must have been years and years ago."

"Only two years, mademoiselle—two short years since my fren' live there—poor fellow! Zee house ees damp. Eet kill him; I know eet. But advice he would not take."

"Well, you'd better go back! Mr. Raritan won't like to be kept waiting;" and her clear, proud eyes watched him half-contemptuously as he minced out of sight.

"There's something uncanny about that little Frenchman. He's like a monkey. I hope Sid will send him about his business," she thought, and then, without another look at the house by the river, that was destined to play such a strange part in the fortunes of her life, she turned down another road.

Her dislike would have sprung to open antagonism could she have seen the valet pause as he reached a green, shaded spot, well out of sight.

He stretched out his arms and yawned, while a very masculine, forcible chuckle, quite unlike the Frenchman's squeaky voice, broke from his lips.

"That was a rum go! I must be more careful! That girl has sharp eyes; a temper, too, by Jove!

I'm glad it wasn't Raritan who saw me. It would have looked strange to be seen coming out of that spooky hole; but the girl will probably forget all about it."

After another yawn he doubled himself up again and stepped into the road, hurrying with small, quick steps, like the proverbial dancing-master's, toward Applethorpe.

Etienne Oudry, the Frenchman, he was now, beyond all doubt; and yet it surely was the gruff voice of Theodore Griggs that had spoken those last words! Theodore Griggs, the lynx-eyed, the smooth-tongued, the tireless; Theodore Griggs, the link between the family at stately old Applethorpe, almost hidden in its beautiful, clustering orchard, and the lonely figure who lived through days of stagnant horror in the eerie, cheerless house by the river—the master who paid him well, but whose face he had never seen.

His presence under Sidney's roof meant that one more strand was added to the web that Destiny, the kind goddess, was slowly and surely weaving.

Yes; Theodore Griggs and Etienne Oudry were the same.

The light faded in the purpling west, and now the moon, no longer pale and shadowy, but a yellow sickle, that touched the top branches of the trees with silver light, shone down on Bebé's loitering figure as she turned her face toward Applethorpe again. She had wandered farther through the fragrant land than she knew. She was fully half a mile from home.

"I'll just have time to dress for dinner," she thought, as she let down the bars of a pretty vine-wreathed stile that barred a meadow running near the grounds around Applethorpe.

It was public land, bare of trees, and looking like a

green, pulseless sea, very enticing and mysterious under the light of the moon.

When she came to put up the bars again, however, she found that the delicate lace on her skirt was surely and firmly wedged between a maddening split in the wood. Tug—tug—tug—went the white, slender fingers, but nothing could move it.

Yet what a pity it would be to tear it—the gown was new, so pretty, too ; in fact, a favorite of hers.

“Oh, dear, dear, dear, was there ever such a plaguey old thing ! People ought to mend their stiles,” she said aloud.

“May I help you ?”

Down went the bar of wood and wide open Bebé’s soft, rosy mouth. She knew that voice ! Knew it ? It sent her blood dancing, thrilling into her cheeks, up to the very roots of her hair.

She turned her saucy profile, and saw before her, like dream-figures risen from the moon-mist, Felix Love with his hand on his horse’s bridle.

“Oh, it’s you ?” she said coolly, quite forgetting all about the imprisoned skirt. “Good evening !”

“I happened along just in time, I see.”

And, oh, how eagerly Felix’s hungry glance took in all the details of that arch, lovely face, the girlish, lissom figure.

He loved her so ! He would have given a good many years of his unspent life to be able to tell her so, to take her in his arms that very second, and know the rapture of pressing his lips to those dimpled, laughing ones that were slightly curled in a dainty scorn.

And to think that he never could tell her—never ! To know deep down in his heart that it was the act of a madman to seek her presence even on the public roads, to bask in the light of her blue, appealing eyes !

"It's all folly—bitter, bitter folly!" he had said that afternoon, as he watched his horse being saddled. "As Hastings says, I have no business to think of love at all, nor wish to be happy until I have settled, once and for all, the mystery of my father's fate. He's right enough. And I will search and search. Whoever is guilty shall suffer, as I'm a man. But Bebé! It will be like tearing my heart out by the roots to let her drift out of my life—and into some other fellow's arms, maybe, some one not half deserving of her, either, who won't love her half as well as I do—for there never was a deeper or stronger love than mine. I think she cares for me a little, too. I almost believe I could win. But she's not for me. I have told Hastings I'd give her up—her brother has forbidden me to cross his threshold. I won't be a fool and flutter round the candle's flame like every other silly moth. My life and hers lie far apart, it seems. There is nothing to be done but be brave and accept the inevitable."

And after these very philosophical reflections, Mr. Felix Love had deliberately turned his horse's head northward; had ridden through Central Park, along the wide, shadowy boulevards, straight to where he could catch a glimpse of stately Applethorpe through the branching trees. So much for human resolution when Cupid is in the game!

Felix's heart was very sore and full of yearning as he stood by Bebé now in the silvery half-light. She was so near him, so enticing! What warm, longing words trembled on his lips! Yet they were less than strangers.

"So close we are, and yet so far apart;
So close I feel your breath upon my cheek;
So far that, though both heaven and earth should meet,
I dare not know thee other than thou art,"

The lines haunted him, tortured him. What a fool he had been to tempt fate ! Yet he had not dreamed of meeting this little love of his. At best he had only hoped for a glimpse of her through the trees.

"Let me help you," he said, after tying his horse to a tree. "You have caught your dress, I see."

"Oh, don't trouble yourself !" returned Bebé, icily. Then, fearing she had been too hasty, she added. "Have you been to Applethorpe ?"

He flushed slightly, and a shadow passed over his eyes.

"No. I've only just ridden up this road."

"Oh, indeed !" politely. "Well, were you going to Applethorpe ?"

"No, Bebé, I was not," he said, desperately.

She stared into his face for a moment, her own growing pale and proud. There was something so final in his tone—something so full of despair—it stung her heart.

In a moment one thought went singing through her brain :

"He loves me, but he is not free, and he dare not come !"

All her pride came to her aid. Felix Love need not think she was the sort of girl to wear the willow for any man. How dare he look at her with that sorrow in his eyes ? Was he pitying her for—for having betrayed she cared for him ?

A final wrench, that left silk, muslin and lace behind it, and Bebé stood up free.

"Good night, Mr. Love," she managed to say.

"You're not going yet ? Just stay a moment ! It seems ages since I saw you," Felix commenced, blindly, madly.

"There was no need for you to deny yourself the

pleasure of my society," answered Bebé, going on for a few steps, and then suddenly facing him, light and mockery in her eyes. "I have a home, you know. I see my friends there, not on the high-roads and commons."

She gave him a curt little bow and walked on.

She was going, and in anger! When would they ever meet again? And, oh, he loved her so! Felix stood irresolute and positively wretched. Then good-by to all his vows of strength!

In a few long strides he reached her side. He touched her sleeve, feeling the warm, smooth flesh through the thin stuff. Her eyes, glorious in the flooding silver light, looked questioningly at him.

His handsome young face was as white as death. His heart was full to bursting. And the words would come, struggle as he might:

"I love you, Bebé, dear! I love you better than anything in the world! Oh, you don't know all! But don't be hard on me! Look at me! Come to me! Bebé, don't you believe I love you—*now*?" And he had her fast in his arms.





CHAPTER XIII.

“GOOD-BY.”

In the wild embrace and the sharp sweet kisses upon the tempting mouth that followed those words of Felix's, all the world was forgotten—at least Bebé made his universe, including sun, moon and stars.

“Do you love me, Beb, dear? Oh, I think you do; but say the word—do say it!” he pleaded, as he held her off and searched her azure eyes deeply.

Soft, delicious, infectious laughter broke from Bebé's lips.

“It seems to me,” she said, with sparkling eyes, “that you have taken that fact quite for granted. Do I love you? Well, let me see—” and she paused, then suddenly let her rounded, muslin-draped arms steal around his neck. “I could eat you,” she whispered, in her childish way. “But why—oh, why haven't you been to see me all this whole week, Felix? I've been like Mariana in the ‘Moated Grange:’ ‘He cometh not—the days are dreary—he cometh not!’ That was the moan of my heart as well as hers. Why haven't you been to Applethorpe?”

The words recalled him from his rose-colored dream to a sense of existing things. Applethorpe—the paradise that held his angel, and which he might not enter!

"Bebé," he said, softly, "come and sit down here on this stone. I have something to say to you."

"Oh, but I really must go now, Felix, dear! I've got to dress for dinner. Vida doesn't like me to be late. You come, too. We'll pardon your riding togs at Applethorpe. Come along."

The careless words strained his young heart. Ah, that all were innocent and clear; that he might go to her home and be with her that soft, summer night; that no shadow loomed up, one long arm stretching out, parting her and him!

He led her gently, but forcibly, to the broad, grass-grown stone, and threw his arm around her slim, belted waist.

"It's just about that I want to talk to you, darling," he said, vehemently, and in a passion of regret and longing he brushed back the light, curling locks from her forehead and looked deeply into her eyes. "I never can go to Applethorpe."

"Why—what do you mean? You're jesting, surely?"

"Jesting? I wish to heaven I were!"

The bitterness and reality in the tone made Bebé grow white.

"Don't talk in riddles; tell me all—why you haven't come and why you can't come?"

Felix took her little, burning hands in his and crushed them fiercely.

"Bebé, darling, after to-night you and I can never meet again. I shouldn't have told you I loved you, only I'm a weak fool; I should have died with my secret unspoken. I couldn't help it, though. This seems like a cowardly excuse, but I couldn't. I want you to know that, whatever comes, I love you. I want you to feel through all the pain and disgrace that may

follow, even if you grow to hate me, to remember that Fate was stronger than I. Oh, Bebé, if only you were another man's sister !”

She had sat with darkening eyes filled with amazement and pain, looking into his as if fascinated. His last stammering, impulsive words gave her an inkling of the truth.

It was because she was Sidney's sister that her lover talked in this way about parting.

She pushed his arm from her, and stood up, a pretty, sylph-like figure in the magical light that flooded the common.

“What's the matter between you and Sid?” she asked, coldly. “Have you anything to say against my brother?”

“It's a strange story, and a long one, Bebé, dear. I can't tell you now. But—but—your brother and I are not friends. Don't ask me why.”

“You spoke of disgrace. Do you mean for me to understand that such a thing could come near Sid? You don't know him, if you do. Nothing you could say would make me believe that. He's the soul of honor, the best, the dearest fellow in the world.”

Two big tears started to her angry eyes, and she faced him with her little hands clenched.

Never had Felix loved her better than in that moment, when she defied him in her defense of her brother. What could he say? Explanation was impossible.

There was only the bitterness of parting left.

He stood up and held out both hands.

“Say good-by to me, dear little Bebé,” he said, and his voice was strained and husky from feeling.

“Good-by?” came in a tremulous question from her lips, and then all the strength of her love rushed over

her warm heart in a flood. She seized his arm in a tense grasp; she looked prayerfully into his face. "What is this that lies between us, Felix? Can't you tell me? You have made my heart cold and sick. Oh, I love you! I love you! Why must we say good-by?"

The night-breeze sighed around them; the silver radiance of the moon poured on their young faces, wearing for the first time the imprint of real, heartfelt grief.

"Bebé, your brother and I are enemies. He has forbidden me to enter his house," said Felix, in a tone that was utterly hopeless. "There is a reason which makes me his enemy, and which parts you and me as surely as death. Oh, darling, if I could find that all this trouble were but a dream, and that you and I were free to marry and be true to each other all our lives long, how sweet it would be. But it is best to look the truth in the face. I know it, and know that marriage for us is impossible. Yes, even friendship. When the day comes when you shall know why, you will see that I speak truly. My love—more to me than life—good-by—good-by!"

He crushed her to his aching heart, and then, fearing to trust himself longer, sprang to his horse's back and rode quickly out of sight.

Bebé, stunned and white, stood where he had left her, one arm flung over the top of the low, wooden post where the loosened bars leaned, her eyes fastened on the curve of the road where, in a shower of silver light, her lover had gone from her sight.

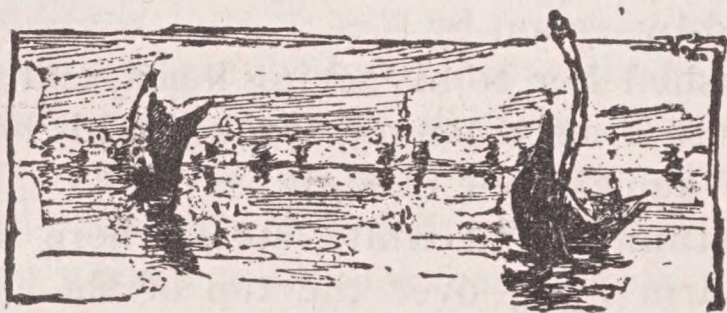
It seemed to her then that something of youth died within her in that moment. There was an awful, ominous feeling of dread in her aching heart. She seemed to see Sidney in the lurid shadow, his face like one dead—she seemed to see Applethorpe closed, deserted, like the lonely house by the river she had looked at

only an hour before—she seemed to see Vida's beautiful eyes filled with tragedy beyond words as she stood a lonely, hopeless figure—and Felix and herself separated by a gulf that never could be passed.

What did it all mean? He had said "disgrace." This was no trifle that loomed up between her and Felix—it was real, awful, lifelong!

The night wind seemed to have grown colder, or was the coldness in her own heart? She shivered, her face was wan and haggard, and she turned from that lonely road down which her lover had passed—was it for the last time?

For the last time?





CHAPTER XIV.

“ It is the little rift within the lute
That by and by makes all the music mute.”

Vida sat waiting upon the terrace for Sidney. Clyde Hastings had gone, and she had changed her gown from the white afternoon silk to a soft, pale yellow that showed the smooth, gleaming pallor of throat and arms.

Her white fingers, glittering with diamonds and emeralds that winked like uncanny eyes in the moonlight, were loosely knotted around her knees ; she was looking far away into the misty, moonlit distance ; her pretty lips were set in an expression of pain and determination.

Never as long as she lived could she forget the brief half-hour spent in Clyde Hastings's company that day. What had he said to make her heart and mind choke with these thick-crowding fears ? Little enough, but his glances, his very way of speaking, his abrupt pauses and contradictions were proof that he was apparently trying to hide something from her—something it would pain her to know of—something he dare not tell her—something about her husband.

The thought wrung her proud heart. This secret of Sidney's that at first had seemed so trivial to her, such a small test of her passionate faith, was beginning to assume proportions that almost terrified her.

"Why may I not know? Why must I be kept in the dark—I, who love him so—who might help him?" was the cry of her heart.

"Waiting for me, Vida?" asked a deep, cheery voice that made her start, and Sidney, running hurriedly up the steps, came toward her.

"How late you are!" she said, trying to keep the tremulous questioning from her voice, as he drew her into his embrace and kissed her tenderly on the lips.

"Late?" he echoed, with a light laugh. "Yes, indeed, and no wonder! How little you women know of the fever that's brewing in Wall Street just now. Why, there was almost a panic on the Street to-day! I'm thoroughly played out! Where's Bébé?"

"I saw her run upstairs a few moments ago. She's dressing. Do hurry, Sidney; don't let's keep dinner waiting; the soup will be spoiled."

"All right, dearie. But—" and pausing, he stepped back to her side again, letting the shaded lamplight from the drawing-room fall fully upon her. "What's the matter? Anything worrying you? You look lovely, darling, but so white! I never saw you so pale before."

"It's the heat," she said, lightly. "And, oh, by the way, you'd better see the new valet. He's with Rugles, and has been waiting some time."

She turned her face away, feeling almost guilty under the gaze of Sidney's candid, fearless eyes.

"I'm off, then. Did Thomas bring up my mail from the club?"

"Yes, I have it safe for you," she replied, playfully. "There are about twenty letters, and you shall not have them until you come down to dinner."

"Oh, they'll keep!" and with a fragment of song on his lips, Sidney went into the house.

The mention of the mail had recalled the letters to Vida, and to employ the time of waiting, she went over to the little Chippendale secretary in the drawing-room where she had laid them. Was it fate that she should pick them up and let them slip slowly through her hands?

"Business—business—business—how easily one tells the mercantile letter. And here's one in Charley Frere's writing. One from the lawyers—I wonder if Sid is making his will? This is a bill from my milliner. That last bonnet was a cruel disappointment. I shall go to Felice after this."

One after the other she dropped them languidly, but at last she came to one that made her bend forward; her level brows knitted curiously.

It was a small letter and written on thin, glazed paper, the sort employed in foreign correspondence. The writing was a woman's, the postmark "London."

"I wonder whom this is from? I wonder if he'll tell me?"

She started up, clutching the small, square envelope fiercely, her bosom panting, a sudden stain starting into her pale cheek.

Irresolute she stood there, passing her hand in a dazed fashion over her brow, every sense quivering.

"What if the secret that is beginning to torture me has something to do with a woman—*this* woman?" was the thought that rang in her mind until her very blood seemed touched with flame.

Should she keep it? Read it?

No; she couldn't do that. She shrank from a dishonorable action. He should have the letter, and she would watch him. If he did not tell her, then she would know that another woman shared his thoughts—perhaps his love.

Like one stricken with an ague, she trembled and closed her eyes. How mad she was ! This suspicious-looking letter, coming so soon after Clyde Hastings's innuendoes, had assumed too much importance in her eyes.

Then, woman-like, she trifled with the temptation, to see, to know something of its contents, just so that Sidney might be cleared in her eyes even from the faintest suspicion.

She had a right to know, surely ! Was she not his wife ? Oh, yes, she must assure herself a little, just to ease her heart and to clear him. There could be no harm—no one would know !

Yet, much as she excused the action to herself, she felt like a thief, as she crept over the softly-carpeted floor, and reaching the door, looked up and down the great square hall filled with rugs and tinted lamps and great nodding ferns in vases. The pretty place was quite deserted.

Without letting her resolution weaken, she glided to the lamp at the window, her rich draperies sweeping behind her, her lovely, golden head bent forward, the whole making an exquisite study in color.

She held the thin envelope close to the white light under the shade, and her eager eyes traced the criss-cross writing with an intensity that was painful.

Only here and there could she distinguish a word, but they were words that stabbed her :

“ That night—love—trust—husband—proof—for you—marry—dear, dear Sidney.”

And the name ! She could see the dark lines of the signature, but, at first, reading it seemed a hopeless task.

Feverishly she bent the thin paper one way and another, until at length she was able to spell out the word she thirsted to know :

"A-l-o-h-a."

Aloha! A strange name and one she had never heard pass her husband's lips.

She stood like one dazed, as white as death, then she moved forward mechanically as she heard Sidney's step upon the stairs, and, without so much as a tremor of the hand, placed the letter among the rest.

"It is all a mistake; there is some explanation of it. He will tell me. I shall laugh at this pain by and by!" she thought, feverishly, as she clasped her cold hands.

"Yes, he will tell me—oh, yes, he will!"

By a supreme effort she forced a smile to her drawn lips.

"Where is Beb? Why doesn't she come?" asked Sidney. "The vain little minx! How many hours does she require for her toilet?"

As he spoke, Bebé's maid appeared at the door.

"If you please, sir, Miss Bebé has such a bad headache she begs to be excused. She was out late, walking; her dress was very thin, and she thinks she got a touch of cold from the dews."

"All right, Jane. Take good care of her. We'll be up to see her after dinner."

Poor Bebé! She did have a headache, indeed, and one whose throbbing could scarcely keep pace with the pangs in her heart. The world was all awry, all out of tune to her that lovely August night. She could only see one face in fancy—her lover's—so set, so full of anguish as he said good-by. She only heard one word that a little imp seemed whispering to her over and over again—"disgrace!"

"So we are to dine *tête-à-tête* to-night, Vida?" said Sidney. "That will be jolly. Do you mind if I take the letters to the table and look them over? No one will probably happen in until after dinner."

"I don't mind in the least—of course not," she managed to say, and then bent her stony face to the bowl of hyacinths beside her to hide its pallor.

How she hated herself to sit there and watch him, with suspicion in her heart! She loved him so! God help her—it was this very love that made the task such a cruel one!

"But he will tell me—I know he will!" she thought, yearningly, tenderly. "And when he does, I'll creep behind his chair and kiss his dear lips. He'll never know that I bury the last doubt of him in that kiss, but it will make me happy to do it."

It seemed an eternity before Sidney lifted the small, shining envelope. Her heartbeats were thick and burning; a clammy dew broke out on her brow; the food she was eating seemed as tasteless as dust.

If he failed her—if he failed her! Oh, would love or life be ever the same again!

"You have a foreign correspondent, I see," she said, in a voice that to her sounded strange and cold.

"Yes. I can't think who it can be from, although I've seen the writing somewhere before," said Sidney, listlessly, as he tore open the envelope.

If a dagger had been stricken to the core of Vida's heart she could not have suffered more blinding pain than now as she covertly watched the whiteness that slowly overspread Sidney's face as his glance met the lines she had partly seen.

He read the letter silently. These were the words:

"No. — PARK LANE, LONDON.

"MY DEAR OLD SID: Did you think me dead, from my silence? Or that I had forgotten you and your loyalty that night—that awful night which haunts me still, no matter where I go? Dear, dear Sidney, you little know how fond I am of you! Why, if I could ever repay your kindness—if I could ever do any-

thing for you to show you how deeply, deeply grateful I am—I would with a glad heart. I mean this. Don't think these are mere words.

“And now to tell you something of my story since I last wrote to you. I cut adrift from the past, and in a new land where no one knew me, where no inkling of my unfortunate story could leak out, I began a new life.

“Little by little I made friends, and among them one that I grew to love. Of course, I struggled against the feeling. What had I to do with love? I had wrecked my life at the start, and as an unloved, unloving wife I was cut off from happiness.

“But a ray of light pierced the darkness that hovered over my sky. Months ago I heard from my father that my husband, Allan Love, was reported dead. Was it wrong to feel a sense of freedom, of joy? Was it wrong to dream of love again?

“More than a year has passed since my marriage, and I understand that still no trace of him can be found. I firmly believe that he is dead. He was a man of many plots, and he had many enemies. In the West how many men have found nameless graves among the lonely rivers, pools, and deep, unexplored canyons?

“Of course, there is no positive proof of this, and I shall wait another year. If in that time no trace of Allan Love is found, surely some steps can be taken to set me free. Some day I may be Lady Germon. You have heard of young Lord Richard Germon, of Wessex Court? He loves me as dearly as I love him. I have told him all of my story that I dared—all but the history of that night on the prairies. That no one must ever know. I feel my heart bursting with shame when I think of it. Ah, what a friend you were to me, Sidney! I can trust my sorrowful secret with you. You will never fail me. What would have become of me but for you? I shudder to think of it. I would have killed myself, poor, ignorant, shame-stricken child that I was!

“You see, I am sending this to your club in New York. News of your return East reached me from home.

“By the way, father has been untiring in his efforts to discover some trace of Allan Love. In doing so he found that all the witnesses of my unhappy marriage, except yourself, are

silenced. The minister went to Africa with a band of missionaries; the sheriff drank himself to death; and the old woman is in the county asylum, insane. You are the guardian of my secret. Where could I find a truer one?

"Oh, Sidney, I love Sir Richard as a woman loves but once. Tell me if I am free to marry him soon, would it be very wrong to hide the history of that wretched night from him? Why should I cloud, by a single shadow, the reverence he has for me? I was a child. I had been bitterly sinned against. Must I tell him? Even should you bid me do so, I fear I could not. No, no! Tell me not to roll the stone from the grave of that sorrowful story. Tell me that the future of love and unswerving loyalty that may be mine can be the full atonement for keeping silence about the bitter past. Do write to me, dear friend.

"Fondly,

ALOHA."

Sidney crushed the letter in his palm, then thrust it in his pocket, not dreaming that Vida, as if under the chill horror of a horrible spell, was watching him.

"Was the London letter interesting?" she asked, at last.

"Oh, no;" then he added absently: "A business matter."

It was scarcely a lie, nor did he mean it so. The impossibility of discussing it with Vida made him take refuge in a sweeping subterfuge.

But to her, as those careless words left his lips, it seemed that a thunderbolt had fallen upon the fair edifice of her life and crushed it to ruins.

He had lied to her! She could never trust him again.

Half an hour later he stood, smoking, leaning against the mantel. She was apparently trifling with some grapes, but under her lashes she saw him covertly tear the letter to bits, and thrust the fragments in his pocket.

One, unnoticed, fluttered to the hearth. She saw this, too.

After he had left the room she glided over and picket it up. It was the last inch of paper, and starting out like letters of fire before her eyes, she saw :
"Fondly, Aloha."

"I shall keep it. Now, nothing shall prevent me from using every power in my brain and heart to discover this secret of his," came in a fierce, gasping whisper from her white lips. "I won't be tricked, deceived. He *lied* to me. I almost—hate him !"

A hard, bitter sob broke from her lips as she thrust the scrap of paper in her breast, where its sharp edge lay like a needle's point against her passionate, jealous, suffering heart.

"I'll say nothing about Clyde Hastings having been here," she thought, and there was a gloomy satisfaction in knowing that Sidney did not like him. "They are enemies ! Then he shall be my friend."





CHAPTER XV.

THE SERPENT LOOKS INTO EDEN.

The summer days were over. The end of October had arrived—days of crisp winds, quick dusks, falling leaves red as blood and yellow as the gold for which Beauty so often sells herself—nights chilly, clear, starlit.

On this particular October night there was to be a ball at Applethorpe.

There was little outward change in that small household, but in reality a gulf was widening every day between husband and wife, while Bebé felt herself old, old, her heart like a stone, as she waited for the thunderbolt that was some day to shatter peace forever.

It seemed to Sidney that of late Vida had nursed a mocking devil in her heart, so quickly did she turn any tender saying of his into ridicule. She was colder. She was becoming a woman of fashion, indeed, constantly entertaining, and filling her days so completely with frivolity that there was little real home life at Applethorpe.

Not knowing the cause of this, he believed that her love for him was waning. The thought stabbed his heart, and he suffered bitterly in silence. Too proud to sue for what seemed drifting from him, he remained away from home more than formerly, and his life was filled with business cares.

But more than all else, he resented the friendly footing Clyde Hastings had gradually secured in his household. The man had made an abject apology for his former charge; had excused the wild words he had uttered as coming from a senseless jealousy; had begged for the sake of his past friendship with both Vida and himself that he might be forgiven.

It was foreign to Sidney's sympathetic, impulsive heart to resist such a plea, particularly as he reflected that he was the victor, the possessor of the happiness for which this man had craved. So, one night, in the club-house at Tuxedo, after a day's shooting with a party of men of which Clyde happened to be one, they had shaken hands and declared that "bygones should be bygones."

This wiping out of an old score was one thing, but Clyde Hastings's constant presence in his house night after night was quite another. He was Vida's companion during long afternoon rides along the tree-shaded boulevards and quiet country roads. They seemed to have much to say to each other of a confidential nature, and her old hatred of him seemed to have altered completely to a warm, appreciative friendship, which a suspicious person might have construed into a warmer feeling.

Such a thought, however, never entered Sidney's mind. His wife's heart might be chilling toward him; but her truth, her honor, were matters that admitted of no question.

On the night of the ball Clyde's chambers were cozy with firelight. He was dressed *en règle*, and had thrown himself languidly into an arm-chair to smoke a last, meditative cigarette.

His thoughts were pleasant, for a smile hovered round his lips, his gray eyes glittering like a cat's.

“Ten days since Markby left for the West with full directions. He’s villain enough to carry out the plan successfully. He ought to do it well,” he thought; and, while gazing into the bed of ruby coals, he sent the blue smoke into fantastic rings around his head. “It was a good plan of mine to conduct the whole matter personally, to have him come on from the West. No scrap of writing must connect me with this scheme. I know too well that a written line has hanged a man before this. He ought to find it easy enough with his resources to discover a dead body in a lonely stream, altered, of course, beyond positive recognition, but with a card of Allan Love’s in his pocket. That memorandum book of Raritan’s which I picked up so carelessly a month ago—I wonder if he’s missed it yet! H’m! How little he guesses that when next heard of, it will be found trampled down in the mud near the river where the body is found. That will be clue enough to start the police; and that unexplained journey across the plains, a little over a year ago, will do the rest.”

He paused in his reflections and lit a fresh cigarette, and now there was passion as well as malice in the narrow, cold, gray eyes that watched the throbbing coals.

“It was useless trifling longer, hoping against hope! The body of Allan Love had to be found, somehow; if not the real one, then a counterfeit, by Heaven! Vida loves Raritan; she’s only fooling with me to make him jealous, as I can see! My chance,” and his nostrils dilated—“my chance lies in the hope of his being proven a murderer! Once declared a felon, she is free, if she chooses. And she will choose. She will not cling to him after that. I think I’d find it in me to kill her if she did!”

After the last words, coming so deeply from his

heart that he gasped them aloud, he sat back and closed his eyes.

"Will she listen to me then? I think I have played the sympathetic friend cleverly, and I think she has gotten over her dislike of me. But—will she ever—marry me? They say 'that everything comes to him who waits.' I have waited! Heavens, have I not? Loved her for years: waited—waited—eating my heart out! I must win! Such love as mine must carry an impetus with it that shatters all obstacles!"

The clock ticked in the drowsy stillness, the coals sent out cheery little sparks, and in the soft, rosy haze he seemed to see her lovely face, the long lustrous eyes, so velvety, with such sorcery in the glance that flashed from beneath the thick lashes.

"What is it Tennyson says of a beautiful woman?" he thought. "I remember I learned the verse when I first met her. She was little more than a child then.

" 'Through light and shadow thou dost range
Sudden glances, sweet and strange,
Delicious spites and darling angers,
And airy forms of flitting change.

But who may know
Whether smile or frown be fleeter?
Whether smile or frown be sweeter?
Who may know? "

As the last words left his lips, slowly, dreamily, there was a quick footstep on the marble hall outside.

"It's Felix!" he thought, as he rose and faced the door.

He was right; for, after a hasty knock, the young fellow entered, his handsome face looking strangely pale in the rosy light.

"Hello, dear boy!" cried Clyde. "Have a cigarette?"

No? Why, how curt you are! And what the deuce do you mean by looking at me that way! Any one would think," he said, with a light, uneasy laugh, "that I owed you money."

"I'm glad I found you in," and there was a touch of scorn in Felix's deep, clear voice. "It's been rather difficult lately. You've been always at Applethorpe when I called here."

As he uttered the last words his glance made Clyde wince.

"Don't be a fool!" he said, curtly. "You know my reasons for going to Applethorpe. Heaven knows I've told you often enough. I'm on the scent. Do you think the chance to study Raritan is going to hurt our plans?"

"Look here," said Felix, bending forward, laying his clenched hand on the table, and letting his frank eyes gaze deeply, fearlessly into Clyde Hastings's. "I don't like your 'snake in the grass' work. Leave that to a detective, if we get enough proof to make it seem necessary. By the way, I've been watching Raritan, too. I've met him on the Exchange. I've talked with men who know him—and—" he paused, a little streak of color stealing into his cheek, a light to his eye—"I don't think he's the man to strike a blow in the dark."

Hastings's brow grew black, and a sneering laugh broke from his lips.

"Oh, don't you, indeed? Of course, the fact that you are madly in love with this fine gentleman's sister has nothing to do with your change of base—eh?"

"Kindly leave all mention of her out of the discussion!"

"Oh, certainly, if you prefer it. But I warn you, don't be a fool! I was your father's friend, and I'm

thinking of revenging his death. You seem to have forgotten him."

"Nothing of the sort," and there was a slight huskiness in Felix's voice. "But I feel more and more every day that there will come some reasonable explanation of his absence. He had plenty of debts—perhaps he's in hiding. There may have been other reasons known only to himself for hasty, sudden flight. Last night I dreamed he stood before me, and said—"

A shout of laughter from Clyde silenced him and made him tingle with wrath.

"My dear boy, I wash my hands of you, if you're going to talk about dreams. Don't for mercy's sake, bring the visions occasioned by late suppers into our arguments as to whether Sidney Raritan did or did not make away with your father!"

Felix picked up his hat. When he spoke again his voice was clear, quiet, and the words he uttered filled Clyde Hastings with a tumult of rage.

"Look here! I've done with you! Go your own way. Seek proof as you like. I, however, have come to the conclusion to obey my instincts. They tell me that Sidney Raritan is an innocent man. You sought his friendship for base reasons—I shall seek it honestly, and take his word of honor when he tells me he is not guilty of the crime I once charged him with. More than this, whether he accepts my apology or not, whether he gives me his hand as a friend or continues to regard me as a foe—I shall marry his sister, if she'll have me. Do you understand me? After to-night we go different paths. No murder can be proven until the body of my father is found. I don't believe it ever will be found! I don't believe Raritan killed him!"

The door closed sharply after him, and Hastings was alone.

"Fool !" he hissed. "Go your own gait, then—but if you interfere with me, it will be worse for you. Marry that girl, and you plan out her lifelong misery and your own. I couldn't want a better revenge—you love-sick young idiot !"

He was white and breathless from the scene, every feature stamped with cold determination and almost diabolical cruelty. His hand trembled when he poured out a glass of brandy.

The light twinkled on the clear amber as he lifted the glass, his mocking eyes still on the closed door.

"He doesn't believe the body will ever be found ! Ha—ha !" and he sent the fiery liquid trickling down his throat.

It warmed his blood ; it gave him back his assurance. Let Felix thwart him if he dared !

"I wonder what he'll say when the body *is* found ? Let's hope he'll be Bebé Raritan's husband then. The devil himself couldn't have arranged things more to his Satanic liking !"





CHAPTER XVI.

VIDA ASKS A QUESTION.

The big, square clock in the entrance hall at Applethorpe pointed to eleven, as Clyde, joining the line of late guests, made his way to Vida's side.

No one would have dreamed what thoughts were in his mind. His distinguished face was calm and languid—yet he was planning a game of fate where life and death were partners.

"You are late," said Vida, as she gave him her hand. "Some of the prettiest girls have had to sit out dances waiting for the men from New York. Is it not a pity?"

"Well, strangely enough, I did not give the prettiest girls a thought, as I came along," he dared to murmur. "I was thinking of the happiness of seeing you again. We have become good friends, have we not? Good—good friends! Ah, these silly flirtations with *débutantes* have a suggestion of sawdust about them, after one has been privileged to occupy the *rôle* of good comrade to a woman like you."

Vida shrugged her pale, smooth shoulders, and her long lashes drooped with a suggestion of half-coquettish weariness.

"Pretty speeches so soon, monsieur? Hadn't you

better occupy yourself now with that little girl in pink staring so wistfully from the corner by the palms? It isn't fair to let her lose this waltz, one of Waldteufel's loveliest. Come, I'll present you!"

And she swept away, the stiff ivory satin folds of her splendid gown brushing him as she passed on.

"Madam is pensive to-night," thought Clyde. "The poison is working. She is not happy. How beautiful she is—how beautiful!"

Despite the fact that her face evidently masked a heart ill at ease, that his subtle treachery was gradually alienating her from her husband, Vida had never seemed so unattainable, so spotless as to-night. Perhaps intensifying this impression was her white gown, unbroken by a single spot of color; the pure pearls around her rounded throat that had such a stem-like grace, the huge bunch of lilies-of-the-valley in her hands. Above this whiteness her pale golden hair was like a diadem. Only the dark, deep eyes gave a hint of the passionate pain that gnawed and gnawed at her sore heart.

Sidney went here and there among his guests. He talked carelessly with Clyde, and the latter was the soul of easy familiarity and good humor.

"He is like a candle shining brightest as its flame leaps in the socket!" thought Clyde, with inward satisfaction. "But he does not know it."

Just before supper, Clyde, after a delicious waltz with Vida, found himself on the balcony with her. They were alone. Behind them in the crowded, flower-hung rooms the music sighed and sobbed, punctuated by the patter of flitting feet and the low notes of well-bred laughter. Before them lay the mystery of the dark landscape, the violet sky where Night had strung her jewels.

Vida's hands were loosely clasped before her, and she looked far away.

How silent she was ! How pale her pure profile was against the shadow !

Clyde longed to lift the lazily drooping hand, longed to press its cool whiteness to his burning lips ; but if he did, then adieu to this dream-fabric of a supposed friendship which he had so laboriously built. He must be watchful, cool ; he must play his part to the end—not far off now.

He was startled from his satisfied dreaming by seeing a silvery tear roll slowly down Vida's pale cheek and splash among the weblike laces on her bosom. But she slowly turned her head away, and when her eyes met his again there was no trace of it. She was the woman of the world, guarded, subtle, proud.

"Will you be surprised," she said, slowly, "if I ask you a very strange question ? And will you answer it without endeavoring to learn why I ask it, and how I come by such information as I possess ?"

Instinctively Clyde knew she was going to speak of something connected with Sidney's past.

"If by any chance she has received an inkling of Allan Love's supposed fate, I 'll deny all knowledge of Raritan's connection with it. The news of the murder must come on her like a thunderbolt," he thought.

"If I can answer your question at all, dear Mrs. Raritan," he said, "I promise to ask no questions."

"Very well, then," and Vida lifted her head proudly as she looked fully in his eyes. "Have you ever heard of a woman named Aloha ?"

The start which Clyde gave was very real. He had been reserving pretty Aloha Brysdale's name as a sort of *coup*, and it was amazing to hear the first mention of her between them come from Vida's lips.

Clyde had as yet but slight knowledge of Aloha Brysdale's life after her mysterious departure from Honolulu, but two facts he had put to account in a corner of his brain to use some day—Allan Love had seemed infatuated with her, and Sidney Raritan had been her constant companion. If Sidney had had a hand in Allan's death, was Aloha Brysdale the cause? He would find this out, as well as other things concerning her. He allowed his silence to make an impression on Vida. He avoided her eyes.

"Why don't you speak?" she said in a low, imperious whisper. "It is a simple question, and I will know."

"Well—yes—I know Aloha," he said reluctantly.

"Aloha—what?" she asked quietly, but with a short breath of eagerness between the words.

"That I cannot answer. You must not ask me more," he said in a constrained tone.

"And why not?" came quickly, passionately from Vida's lips. "Why may I not know this woman's name? There, you needn't reply. I would be a fool indeed if I could not read between the lines. You are a guest in my husband's house, and you feel a delicacy in betraying his secrets to his wife. Isn't that it?" And her lovely mouth was pale and drawn from the storm rising in her heart.

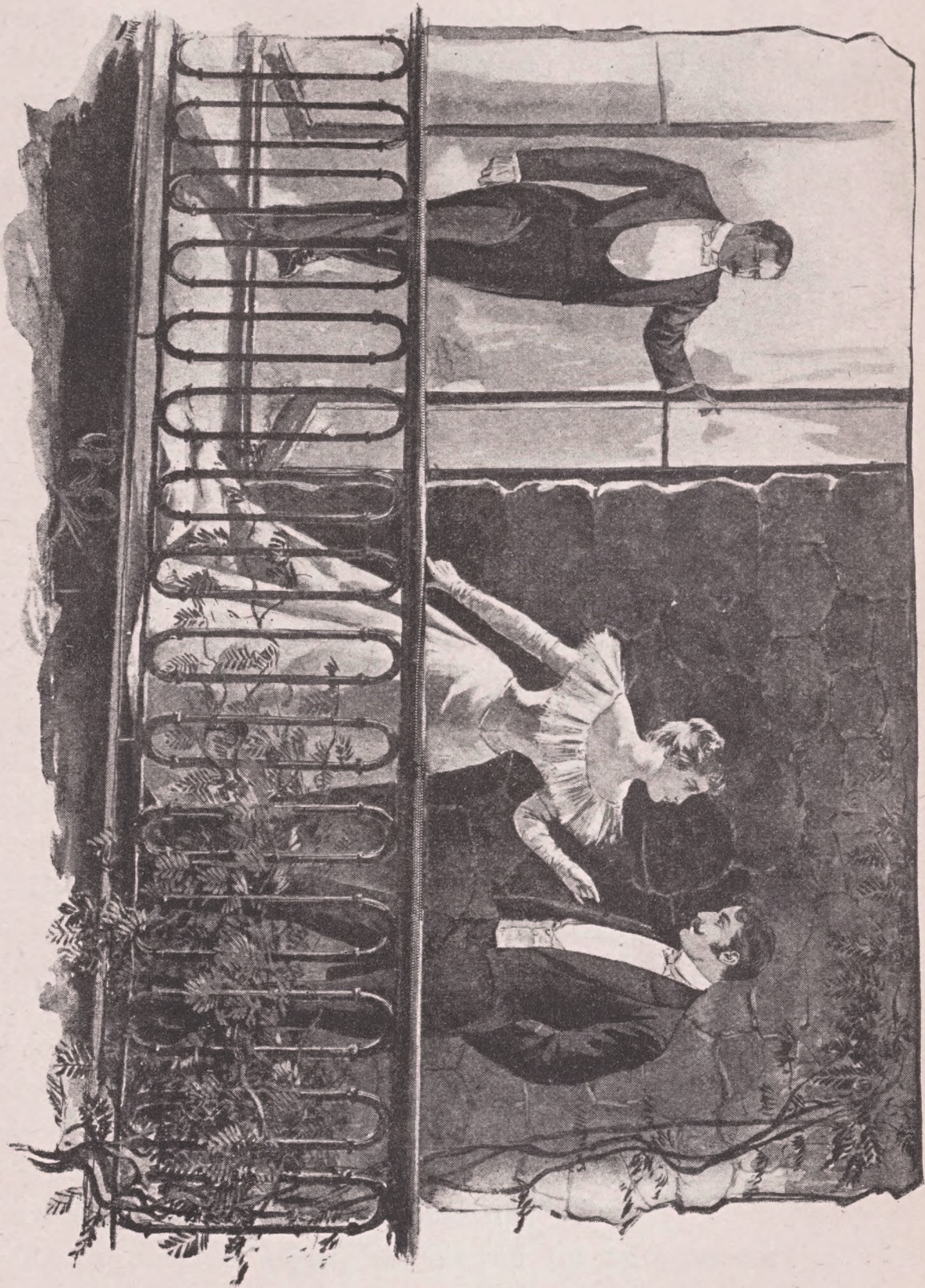
There was no reply; but Clyde allowed his glance to plunge deeply, pityingly into her upraised eyes.

"Why torture yourself this way? Isn't it better to let sleeping dogs lie?" he said, in his suave, persuasive tones.

"One thing you must answer me," she persisted. "Sidney knew this Aloha?"

"Yes, he did."

"Where is she now?"



THE WORDS DIED ON HER LIPS. SIDNEY, UNSEEN, HAD STEPPED OVER THE LOW WINDOW.—See Page 129.

‘I don’t know. For pity’s sake, spare me and spare yourself. No good can come from tossing the smoldering ashes and waking a dead fire,’ he pleaded.

“When did you last see this woman?” Vida went on, relentlessly.

“Almost two years ago, when she left her home in Honolulu and disappeared as if the ground had swallowed her.”

“Indeed! Quite a little romance. And you say you do not know where she is now?”

“I haven’t an idea.”

A slow, bitter smile spread over Vida’s face.

“I know where she is. If I tell you, will you seek her—will you let me see her—will you let me find out something about her?”

The words died on her lips. Sidney, unseen, had stepped over the low window, and seeing his wife in the shadow with Clyde Hastings, her lovely face upraised almost piteously, her eyes glowing, had retreated as rapidly.

“So it’s true! Vida has drifted from me!” he thought, as he passed down the hall to his quiet study and flung himself into a chair by his writing-table. “In some strange way this man, whom once she hated, has managed to gain an ascendancy over my wife’s heart. The look her eyes held was one of confidence, of entreaty. Of what were they talking? How dare he? How dare he? And Vida —Oh, heaven, let me not think what she was to me in the days of our happiness before this shadow came to part us!”

Like a restive tiger, he sprang up and paced the room from corner to corner. His proud, manly face was almost livid, and a deathly moisture stood on his brow.

“The time has come to assert myself. Even if I crush my own happiness to atoms, I shall crush the romance that blooms from the wreck of my hopes. It is useless to blind myself longer. Vida does not love me. She only seems happy when with Clyde Hastings. She shall choose between us!”





CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE ARBOR.

"Won't you have one more turn—just one?"

Bebé's partner spoke these words as he bent over her, an imploring look in his eyes.

But Bébé had waltzed enough. She was tired, and had long ago voted the ball a bore. So she sat in the corner, her satin-slippered feet crossed, a frown on her brow.

"Oh, Mr. Wilkins, I really can't! I'm so tired, it's an effort to lift my lids to look at you."

"That's because your lashes are so long," burst forth the young man, with cumbersome impetuosity. He somehow reminded Bébé of a great Newfoundland dog, and she had had enough of his heavy prancing.

"Do go and get me something cold. There's another half hour before supper, but you'll find cold things on the buffet."

"You will stay here, right in this corner?"

"In this very spot!" she promised, emphatically, and then only waited for the disappearance of the young man's plunging back through the crowd to slip out of the window, down the balcony stairs into the cool, dark park.

Oh, to be alone for a few moments to think her own

thoughts! She had thought the ball might distract her, but she had never missed Felix Love so much as to-night, when every face she knew looked at her under the flashing lights, save his.

She walked on, a tired droop to the childish figure, until she reached a small arbor hidden among thick knots and loops of vines.

Entering this, she sank back on the rustic seat, and clasping her hands, pressed them hard over her eyes. How long ago that August night seemed when Felix had held her in his strong young arms, and had whispered his love for her.

Not once had she seen him since. If he had died or put continents between them he could not have passed out of her young life more utterly. Truly, he had kept his vow.

And the disgrace he had spoken of? Every morning when she awoke her first thought was :

“It may come to-day.”

But days and days passed, spending themselves from sunrise to sunset, and still no shadow fell.

“Was he wrong? What if the disgrace he spoke of is but a mistaken idea of his? What if he is spoiling both of our lives because of a dread of that which never may happen? Oh, Felix, Felix! Shall I never see you again? Never? Never?”

Her curved, babyish mouth trembled, and she flung out her arms with a sigh. A weight of sadness seemed pressing on her heart, a little sob broke from her, and the distant lights in the house were blurred by the burning drops that clustered on her lashes.

Suddenly a sound startled her. It was the striking of a match. Peeping through the vines, she saw the outlines of a tall, youthful figure under a tree; another moment and the small, sputtering light showed

her that the intruder was in tweed riding clothes, instead of the conventional evening dress, and that he was leaning against the tree trunk, in the act of lighting a cigarette; the next moment her heart leaped and stood still. It was Felix!

For a moment everything grew dim before Bebé's eyes, then she clung to the trellis work and gazed at that silent form, as if she would never tire. From the black distance under the thick trees she heard a soft neigh, and knew her young lover had ridden all the way from New York, just to gaze at the windows in the hope of seeing her flit past. The idea of such romantic love thrilled her impulsive heart to its depths, and she could scarcely keep her lips from sobbing out his name.

Again the horse's neigh reached her.

"Silence, Prince, silence, old boy! Would you betray me?" he whispered, turning and laying his arm affectionately around his horse's neck.

What should she do? Steal out and speak to him? No, it was he who had decided that they must part. He had not come to see her now, only to watch her from afar off. She must not seek him.

She watched him in silence while one cigarette faded and he lit another, his eyes continually fixed on the lighted windows. For a second he twirled the match in his fingers, then flung it carelessly away. The wind caught it up, and the spark, unseen by Bebé, alighted upon her gown. In a moment the flimsy tulle was ablaze. A low, muffled shriek broke from her lips—she uttered only one word:

"Felix!"

The events of the moments that followed were very misty to Bebé. She had a consciousness of a coat being wrapped around her, and of being held very fast in

two strong arms ; she knew a voice she loved spoke her name again and again in tones of contrition, tenderness, passion.

Suddenly she looked up, and, unable to control the rush of feeling that swelled her childish heart, a sobbing cry left her lips :

“ Oh—oh, I ’m so glad to see you—again ! ”

“ Bebé, dear one, tell me, are you hurt at all ? ” Felix asked, as he scanned the imprisoned wrists, his face all concern and gentleness.

“ No, you ’ve made a wreck of my tulle—but that ’s nothing. Bother the gown ! Tell me something about yourself,” she said, her sweet eyes seeking his shyly. “ Have you been in New York or far away ? Have you been well ? Did you come here to-night—because—because— ”

“ I hoped to see you in the distance ? Yes, Beb, for that alone. Ah, it is good to be able to see you here and speak to you, for I have much to say. I was going to write it—but how much better to say the words face to face.”

She looked in amazement at the glow lighting up his eyes, while he leaned closer.

“ What, Felix, what ? ” came in a warm breath from her parted lips.

“ I want to tell you,” he said, almost fiercely, “ that I was wrong, all wrong, when I spoke to you as I did about Sidney. I want to say I was a fool, a hot-brained idiot jumping to conclusions that have no substantiation ! Dear Beb, will you forgive me ? Will you ? Will you let me go back and begin all over again from the happy days we had in the little farmhouse in Canada, and before I let wild suspicions poison my mind against your brother ? Oh, there ’s nothing I won’t do to show you how sorry I am for having uttered those

words to you—and caused you pain—my love—my little love !”

Bebé could scarcely believe that the trembling delight which rushed over her was real. Oh, to be there in the soft night, alone with Felix, and hear him utter golden words of hope and light which sent the shadows, that had so tormented and clouded her young life, flying like mists before the approach of the sun.

“Does Sidney know ?” she asked, in a happy whisper.

“He knows I was mad enough to suspect him of—no matter what now. But that is past. To-morrow I will seek him, and I know he will generously accept the apology I’ll offer him. Don’t you think he will, my darling ?”

“Yes—yes. Oh, I am so happy now. I know,” she said, laying her gloved hands upon her lover’s thick, soft hair ; “I know now that we carry our own night or day in our hearts. Before you came to-night, I was so sad, everything seemed at a standstill, and I felt old, old, old ! Now it seems as if the world was overflowed with joy and everyone as happy as I am.”

“Then, Beb, dear, you will be my wife ?”

For answer she let her supple arm slip around his neck.

“If not your wife, Felix,” she said with a sweet earnestness, “then never a wife.”

“My darling, nothing shall separate us ! Nothing ! Oh, that I may be worthy of you !”

An hour slipped by unnoticed, and not until a step on the gravel disturbed the silence did the lovers start from their dreaming.

“Good night, Beb, dear, until to-morrow,” Felix whispered, as he gave her a hurried kiss. “It would never do for me to be seen here, imitating the peri who

peeped into Paradise. But to-morrow all will be well. Good-by, dear. Good-by."

She watched him swing his lithe, strong body to the saddle and softly urge his horse through the thick trees fronting the road.

It was an ecstatic moment. Love was so new, so sweet to little Bébé ! She thought of her lover's words, his tender, impassioned caresses, and of the radiant promise the future held for her. Oh, how wonderful ! How wonderful ! To think that a man loved her, little Bébé Raritan, like that, when only six months ago she had been led to believe that the most important thing in life was the French verb ! She knew better now.

Gathering up the charred masses of tulle, she laughed softly and ran on toward the house.

"That dear match !" she said. "Why, if the spark hadn't been obliging enough to set me on fire, I might have let him go away without betraying my hiding-place, and cried myself to sleep as usual."

She reached her room, after passing one of the maids, who, leaning over the balustrade, was watching the brilliant scene the great square hall below presented.

"Hortense, go down and tell Mrs. Raritan not to be surprised at my absence at supper. I have torn my gown in the garden, and feel like going to bed."

"Very well, miss. But couldn't I mend it for you ?"

"Oh, no, no !" said Bébé, emphatically, dexterously crushing the fabric in her hands, so that the charred ends were hidden ; while inwardly she whispered : "I'll never part with this gown. I'll keep it, burned and all, just as it is. Ah, that lucky match !"



CHAPTER XVIII.

A DISCOVERY.

When Felix was well out of sight, and Bebé had disappeared within the house, that step upon the gravel-walk, which had ceased rather mysteriously, was explained. Monsieur Oudry rose suddenly from the shrubbery growing close against the arbor, and a long, low whistle left his lips.

"So the wind lies that way, does it?" he muttered, as he lazily flicked the dust his knees had gathered. "If things are as I gravely suspect with my silent client in the little house down there by the river, the love-making of these young fools is apt to come to rather a dramatic close. I wonder what he'll say when I tell him that Felix Love is to marry the sister of the man he hates so bitterly! I wonder what he'll say?"

He lit a cigar and strolled leisurely down the path to the great gates opening on the wide, white road.

"I dare not venture farther. Should Raritan need his valet he must be at hand, and this infernal ball can't last much longer."

He strolled to a stone wall, and lightly stepping to its highest sweep, peered down among the trees. Below, faint and eerie, could be seen a light in the dusty windows of the house by the river.

"He waits for me. Good heavens, how he thirsts for news! How impatient he is of delay! He hopes every day to hear that Sidney Raritan has been disgraced. He pins his faith on Hastings. But nothing happens. Raritan goes his way as frankly as if there was nothing on his soul to make him dread meeting any man's eye; and Clyde Hastings—a wolf in sheep's clothing, if ever there was one—is very busy worming his way into the confidence of the lovely, unsuspecting mistress of Applethorpe. Ah, well, it's a pretty little game—and between my friend in the river house and such a cold-blooded plotter as Mr. Clyde Hastings, it will be strange if Sidney Raritan doesn't find himself in a terrible position before many days."

"Mas'r Griggs—Mas'r Griggs!" the hoarse whispered call, coming as from a man out of breath, pierced the dead silence of the place; and Griggs, lifting his head as a pointer does trying to place a scent, saw old Remus hidden in the leafy turning of the road and beckoning to him furiously.

"What's the matter?" he asked, sharply; for if it had been possible for a black face to be drenched of its color Griggs would have seen that Remus was livid.

"Oh, mas'r, come with me! I done think Mr. Fairleigh's daid—yas'r! I done think he's knocked clean over. He lies there 'thout sayin' a word, no matter how hard I shake him! Oh, sir, I can't stay there alone with him, and think he may be daid. You'll know what to do, sar—yas'r. Do come! Do come!"

Griggs went ahead of the stumbling, faithful old man, and reaching the house by the river, found the door above the well-worn step standing wide open.

In the distant darkness of the hall the dying embers of a fire could be seen, shedding a fitful, slumberous

glow, and making the shadows intensely deep by contrast.

The door leading into Mr. Fairleigh's study was closed, but on opening it an impressive scene met Theodore Griggs's eyes. On the table lay old letters, which had only lately been reread, a few daguerreotypes and faded *cartes de visite*. The chair at the table had been violently pushed back, and lay overthrown upon the floor, and the tall candles burning on the mantel threw their long rays on the figure of the strange being he served, prone on the floor, the long, sheltering robe wrapped closely about it, and the face, as usual, hidden by the hood.

"Why, he's lying on his face!" cried the detective. "It's a wonder he doesn't smother!" and he darted toward him.

"Let me—let me do it!" cried old Remus. "Nobody must see his poor, burned face but me; nobody must touch him but ole Remus. Oh, is he daid—daid?"

"Let me lay my hand on his heart," said Griggs, following the negro; and through the thick cloth he could feel it beating faintly. "He has swooned. I wonder why? Do you know anything about it? What has he been doing to-night? Reading old letters? Possibly he came upon some that affected him deeply. Anything else? Speak up now! I have your master's interests at heart, and details of this sort must not be hidden from me, if I am to serve him properly. What has he done to-night? I can see you know something. Speak!"

Remus for a moment looked undecided and troubled.

"'Twas jes' this," he said, at last, his voice broken. "Mas'r Fairleigh sat readin' one letter after another, and at las' he jumped up and struck his hands together. 'I can't stand this!' he said. 'I'll strangle if I stay here another minute!' With that, he got up and went out."

"Went out? Does he ever do that?"

"Very seldom, sar, an' only when it's long past midnight, and sometimes only around the garden. But to-night, I think all he'd been hearin' of that thar big ball up at the big house kind of onsettled him, and, the poor dear, he couldn't stay here in the stillness, nohow. Sometimes he gits mighty fretful—yas'r, he cries like a child."

"How long ago was it since he went out?"

"Not more'n half an hour or so. He wasn't gone fifteen minutes, when he came, sank down on the sofa, wringing his hands—the nex' moment he rolled over on the floor, and no matter how much I called him, he wouldn't make no answer. Then I was 'fraid he was daid—and went for you."

"He appeared frightened when he came in?"

"Sort o' breathless, and called out—" old Remus paused, and set his lips firmly.

"You are holding something back. What did he say? Speak up, I tell you! I must know—or I can't help him!"

"I cayn't tell jes' what he said, 'twas so muffled like and all as if he were chokin'," said the old man, stubbornly turning his face away.

"You do know, Remus. If you tell me—"

"I cayn't tell you, sar. You wouldn't understand. 'T was jest a name."

At that moment a weary, quivering wail came from the unhappy man's lips.

"Felix! Felix! I want you! Oh, Felix, my son! my son!"

It was in vain that Remus tried to silence that cry of longing from a full heart. It echoed through the room, full of agony, full of insistent yearning.

"Felix, my son!"

Theodore Griggs only nodded, and his eyes grew more inscrutable.

"He was prowling around the grounds at Applethorpe, and he saw Felix Love. That knocked him over. So he has a heart? Yes, and his son holds every inch of it."

"He's movin' a little. I wonder ef he'd take some brandy?"

Griggs sat down at the writing-table and pretended to be busy with a letter.

"By all means, get him some brandy," he said, still busily writing, and without glancing over his shoulder.

Remus hesitated for a moment whether to leave the prostrate figure there at the mercy of the detective's curiosity; but Griggs's appearance of remoteness and earnestness in his task decided him, and he hobbled quickly from the room.

Without permitting a second's delay, Griggs was on his knees and had lifted the cloth from the face until the candlelight played weirdly on all the exposed features.

He started back, his healthy face grown a ghastly hue, his eyes full of unspeakable horror.

"Heavens!" he cried, groping his way blindly to his chair and sinking into it. "So that is his secret? It is more horrible than I fancied. Oh, I never dreamed of—*that!*" For a few moments he sat as if stunned.

When old Remus returned, even his shrewd eyes saw nothing strange in the detective's face. Theodore Griggs had learned to control all signs of emotion.

"I never dreamed of—*that!*" he said again, below his breath. "I guessed before to-night that he was Allan Love, and he wants to be considered dead for the sake of revenge. I know the whole story now!" And he shuddered. "Dead? Better if he were! Oh, better a thousand times!"



CHAPTER XIX.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

Another week had passed, bringing few changes. Sidney had decided to be patient, not to judge too quickly, and to try by various acts of kindness to heal the breach between himself and Vida.

He feared to mention Clyde Hastings's name between them. How bitterly he might some day regret his quick wrath should he rush into the dissension his jealousy prompted ! Perhaps he had not been as lover-like with Vida of late as he should have been. The claims of business kept him from home a great deal, and he had perhaps fallen into that fault of husbands—of taking his happiness so much for granted that a continued expression of his love and contentment had seemed unnecessary.

Yes, he might be to blame. Doubtless he was, to a great extent. It was such a familiar story—a young and beautiful wife, fancying her husband's love cooling, endeavoring to fill her life with innocent excitement and the admiration of other men.

A dangerous game to play with a man like Clyde Hastings—a game where Folly and Vanity watched the fortunes of the opponents. But Vida might very naturally not realize the serious nature of it, nor dream how deeply she was paining him.

The result of these musings made him adopt a

cheery, satisfied manner he was far from feeling, and when he entered the breakfast-room a few mornings after the ball, Vida was amazed at his light-heartedness.

"It matters very little whether I am cold and formal with him," she thought, her heart throbbing painfully. "Probably the explanation of his happy face lies in the fact that he has had another letter from his London correspondent. Oh, why, why can't I hate him for his cool perfidy? Why am I in torture all day long, my heart asking but the one question: 'Does he love her still?' But I will not always remain in the dark about this affair of his life. Clyde Hastings knows all, I am convinced, and from him I will learn the truth. I will lead him on, I will use all the arts of coquetry and finesse—but the secret of my husband's life I shall win from him, and very soon."

Sidney bent over her shoulder.

"Beb is not down yet—won't you kiss me good morning, dear?" he asked in the deep, questioning tones that still thrilled her, in spite of her stormy heart.

She turned a cool cheek to him without meeting his eyes. Sidney hid his pain, and gently, deliberately laid his hand beneath her chin until he had compelled her gaze to meet his. The reproach in his eyes was like a stab, and he kissed her gently on the lips.

"I have some pleasant news for Bebé," he said, as he seated himself at the table. "Ah, here she is, so one telling of it will be sufficient."

"Good morning, good people!" cried Bebé, darting into the room, a lovely picture in a morning-gown of blue, which set off the radiant color in her cheeks. "Am I very late? But please, please, don't be shocked at my lazy habits, for I'm so much better than I ever expected to be."

"Indeed? And what delightful errors had you planned for yourself, minx?" asked Sidney.

"Why, at school I fully made up my mind that when I came out in the world, in society, I would copy all the French countesses I read of, and have my morning chocolate in bed. Oh, it seemed a delightful idea, to think of the maid entering with a silver tray on which was set a little service, a bunch of violets and the morning mail, all—"

"All the letters, of course, containing protestations of undying affection from numerous admirers?"

"Of course! And, oh, I expected to be very, very cold to him. It seemed so aristocratic and queenly to be very stand-offish and chilling—though they died at my feet for want of one kind glance!" she said, with melodramatic fervor.

Vida gave a little laugh.

"You didn't begin by keeping your word, did you, Beb? As witness, your warm appreciation of Felix Love!"

The color flew more deeply into Bebé's cheeks, and a shadow fell across her eyes.

Never since the day they first saw him at Delmonico's had Vida mentioned his name before Sidney. No wonder Bebé was startled. But Vida had purposely spoken of him now. Felix Love was a link in the chain that held Sidney to that secret past of which she burned to know—which she must know—and she wanted to watch what effect the suddenly spoken name would have on him.

It was her turn to be surprised, for Sidney, with a covert glance of amusement at Bebé, said, calmly:

"My news for Bebé was about this very young man. I had a long talk with him on the floor of the Exchange, yesterday. I want to bring him home to dinner to-night."

Vida sat like a stone.

"I thought you and he were unfriendly," she said in a colorless tone.

"We were. It was all Hastings's doing. Felix has had his eyes opened to the truth. In fact, dearest, the boy and I patched the matter up finely. I like him. He's a frank, whole-souled young chap. If I had a sister who was a bit interested in him, I would speak a good word for him any day," said Sidney, with suspicious gravity. "But as I haven't—"

A sudden rush and two arms fast locked around his neck prevented any further words from his lips. Bébé was embracing him like a young bear.

"You're—you're—a love—a brick—you're the dearest fellow in the world!" she said, her lovely face aglow with delight.

"With one exception, of course—Mr. Felix Love!"

"Not even he! No, indeed! Oh, Sid, I do love you!" and she kissed him with all her heart.

Vida was mystified. She seemed more in the dark than ever. Without tasting the food, she sat busily toying with a bit of toast, her thoughts in a ferment.

After breakfast Sidney surprised her in her *boudoir*. She was sitting against the lace-curtained window, her elbow on her knee, looking out at the horizon, where a line of low hills trailed. She did not hear him enter, and he was impressed by the despair, the loneliness of her attitude, by the pallor of the lovely profile.

"Vida dear," he said, softly, and she started almost guiltily as he approached, a look almost of resentment in her dark eyes, "I think you are not looking quite yourself, darling. I'll tell you what I'll do. You and I have not had a *tête-à-tête* adventure in a long time," he said, sitting beside her, and slipping his arm around her waist. "See here, now! Suppose you come into

town to-day—down town, where the money is made, and we go to lunch at the Lawyers' Club. In the afternoon, as it's the first *matinée* of the operatic season, and Jean de Reske plays Faust, let's take a hansom up to the opera house in true Bohemian style. Will you, dear? Will you?"

Vida felt a mist of tears rising within her. Her hand trembling in his. Such pleasure as he described would be delightful if confidence existed between them; but now, while she doubted, while her passionate heart was torn by pain and fears, a ghost would sit beside them and poison the joy of the otherwise happy day.

Sidney was surprised to see the tears rising into her eyes, while her lips remained mute.

"Vida!" he said, in a voice of pain, and, laying down his hat, which he had taken preparatory to departure, he seized her in a yearning clasp, and tried to draw her to his breast.

But she resisted, and before he dreamed of her intention, she had slipped to the ground and laid her head upon his knee, sobbing as if her heart would break.

"What is it, my darling? Speak—trust me, dear. Something is troubling you—I have known it for a long time. Do tell me all. Your grief, whatever it is, will be lighter if I share it. Oh, my wife, my dear wife, my one love, speak—speak!" Sidney pleaded, as he smoothed the golden head bowed before him.

But the storm subsided almost at birth. Her husband's tender words, his compassionate tone jarred upon her and roused her pride, fully armed.

She thought of the letter signed

"Fondly, ALOHA."

She thought of Clyde Hastings's hints at a secret in

her husband's life. Oh, he should be kneeling before her praying for forgiveness or confessing his sin in broken tones, and she should be the sympathizer, the judge.

With a hard, uneasy laugh she started up, and dashed the tears away.

"What a piece of folly!" she said with a shrug. "Sidney, we women are very queer creatures, are we not? We weep for nothing—and when real trouble comes we teach men how to be strong."

She moved to the dressing-table and lifted her hands to her hair, arranging a stray tress more carefully.

"Then your tears meant nothing more than that your nerves were a little out of order?" questioned Sidney, standing up and looking at her with grave, loving eyes.

"Nothing more," said Vida lightly.

But Sidney was not satisfied. There had been anguish in that stormy sobbing, and he had felt as if on the brink of some revelation.

"Dearest," he said, "tell me—you are perfectly happy! Are you?"

"I am—happy," she said. "Are you?"

She turned and faced him, a mocking smile on her lips.

"I should be an ingrate if I were not," said Sidney. "Do I not love you with heart and mind, body and spirit—are you not mine? That alone, without any of the smiles of Fortune, would be enough to transform my life to heaven."

He paused, and his gaze was all of love.

"I have felt, lately, Vida, that there was not that perfect confidence between us which we had at first;" he took both her hands and his glance was earnest

almost to pain. "I beg that you will not let any trifle mar our happy life. If you have any fault to find with me, tell me of it. Don't nurse it in your heart. If anything troubles you, come to me. Give me your confidence as I know I have your heart."

"Have I your confidence?" asked Vida, slowly, and her pulses began to throb heavily. "Think! Is there nothing in your life that confession would make lighter—nothing that I ought to know?"

She misinterpreted the pallor that grew around Sidney's lips to a sign of conscious guilt, despite his words.

"There is nothing in my life to trouble or shame me—nothing!"

"But one's life may be all wrong, and yet one might feel no twinges as a result. That, you know, is largely a matter of conscience. One man makes his living by murder; another writhes in agony for a wicked thought," she said, her cheeks suddenly burning, her eyes defiant.

"My conscience is a very troublesome one, or would be if I gave it reason, no matter what you may think, Vida, to the contrary," said Sidney, sternly, his heart contracting at her glance and words. "I hide no guilty secret."

"Yet," she continued, "what of that secret which almost separated us before our marriage?"

There was a moment's silence between them.

"You promised to bury all memory of that. You urged me to stay when I would have gone away and cleared myself of the faintest suspicion," was Sidney's reply. "I can no more explain it now than then. You were willing to take me on faith in those happy days. Why not now?" And he held out his arms.

"Mysteries are very pleasant in books. I can't say

"I fancy them in real life." And ignoring his loving gesture, she turned from him.

Just then Bebé came tripping into the room, and Sidney, seeing that the time was past for further words on the subject, took up his hat again.

"By the way, Vida," he said, in a constrained tone, "do you care to lunch down town and go to the opera, as I suggested?"

"Thank you very much, dear," she said, with a provoking smile; "but unfortunately I have an engagement for this afternoon."

"Yes?"

"I am going for a ride with Mr. Hastings."

Sidney turned on his heel and left the room without another word





CHAPTER XX.

A MORNING INTERVIEW.

But his mind was made up. The time had come for action. Sidney swore in his heart that Clyde Hastings would not ride beside his wife that afternoon, and that the friendship daily strengthening at the cost of her trust in him should be stopped at once.

The coachman who drove him to the station noticed his pale, stern face, and wondered what had gone wrong. The passengers who sat opposite him in the train saw plainly that he was far from his surroundings in thought, and the thoughts were far from pleasant.

Instead of going far down town on the elevated train, he alighted at a street in the Fifties, and soon found himself on Fifth Avenue.

"Half-past eleven. He is up by this time, I suppose," thought Sidney. And he entered a large apartment house on the corner where Clyde had his luxurious bachelor home.

He was still at his breakfast when his visitor was announced, and sprang up with every appearance of friendly welcome.

"Ah, Raritan, who'd have dreamed of seeing you around these diggings so early? Have some coffee with me."

His quick eye had read Sidney's face aright, and he was quite prepared for his next words.

"My mission, Mr. Hastings, is not a pleasant one. No, thank you, I will not sit down. I have only a few words to say and but a moment to say them in."

"Nothing wrong at Applethorpe, I hope?" and Clyde paused in lighting his cigarette.

"There seems to be more wrong at Applethorpe than I can understand, since you began visiting there," said Sidney, in a low, distinct, ringing voice. "You understand me? I want to tell you that I no longer believe in your friendship for me, nor that you think you did me a wrong in the past. I believe you took that way of entering my home and trying to destroy my peace."

"Why, have I done so? I was not aware of it. Aren't you alarming yourself unnecessarily?" and Clyde looked almost languid, as he leaned back.

"You have not succeeded as yet—and you shall not. I shall see to that, you may be sure," and Sidney's voice was hoarse with passion. "I was a fool to believe in you. Since the day you first entered my home, a coldness has come over my wife's manner to me that can only be explained one way. Your lies have poisoned her mind against me—your lies—do you hear?"

"I hear quite well. Go on."

"I had not meant to say this much. My definite command is simple. You need not present yourself at Applethorpe this afternoon to accompany Mrs. Raritan on her ride, for I shall be there to go with her, if she wishes it, and I don't want you. More than that, I will not permit your visits at my home in the future!"

He went to the door, and when his hand was on the knob, Clyde's voice arrested him.

"You've been very kind to come out of your way to save me the trouble of a ride uptown. I won't forget it. Good morning."

But while the words were being spoken, Sidney's eye had caught sight of a portrait lying on the disordered desk. For a moment he thought he was surely the victim of a burning fancy, for Vida's delicate coloring was reproduced on that disc of porcelain by an artist hand.

Before Clyde was aware of his intention he had crossed to where it lay, and was gazing at it with stormy, haggard eyes.

Yes, it was Vida, and this painting was a reproduction of a photograph taken very recently.

The beating of their hearts could be heard as the two men looked at each other. Then Sidney lifted the delicate thing and sent it crashing to the hearthstone, where he ground it to fragments beneath his heel.

With a cry that was like a snarl, Clyde started up, his hands clenched, a torrent of insensate oaths leaving his quivering lips.

"Strike me," said Sidney, calmly, "and I'll kill you!"

The words seemed to calm Clyde's passion to iciness, and a sneering smile curled his lips.

"Who's had the better part of this little scene this morning, you or I?" he asked. "Why should I strike you?"

"Perhaps you think I fear you. It would be easy to combat you, Mr. Clyde Hastings, if one stooped to use your weapons—treachery, revenge, duplicity. Even without those I will conquer, and I advise you to keep out of my life unless you want to taste defeat."

For some moments after Sidney's departure, Clyde sat gazing steadfastly at the fragments of porcelain strewn the hearth.

"Three hundred dollars thrown away for that miniature! Well, no matter! To see his face blanch and his lips tremble when he caught sight of that pictured face was worth a good deal more—yes, by Heaven, a good deal—worth every penny I possess!"

He rang the bell violently.

"More coffee, Antoine."

While sipping the hot, black fluid, he sat absolutely silent, and what his reveries were might be guessed from the cold, evil light in his narrowed eyes.

"A telegram, sir," said Antoine, entering again, with the yellow square of paper in his hand.

Clyde started from his dreaming, and tore the envelope open with trembling eagerness.

"Everything ready. Watch for Wednesday or Thursday morning. MARKBY."

"Good! What a treasure the man is! What grit! What nerve!" Clyde muttered, as he sprang up, and commenced pacing up and down the room.

What did he see in fancy? Some lonely spot in a far-away, western wilderness, a black pool, where frogs piped their eerie chorus at the death of day—silence everywhere, except for the raucous cries of vultures wheeling against the blue sky visible above the tall, slender trunks of pines. And what else? Was there no human creature there—no face—no form? Yes, surely, there in the deepest shadow, where the grass was longest in the slimy pool and the shadows thickest, something floated—something horrible, uncanny—something with only a passing resemblance to a man—a drowned body, with blurred features, its sodden rags bearing a mark that proclaimed it was once Allan Love.

Oh, a ghastly cause for joy, truly! Clyde Hastings could never have accomplished the fraud himself.

But Markby, whose God was money, and who seemed to have been created without a heart—he had succeeded.

He was once an army doctor, and had made a specialty of knowledge concerning acids and poisons. He knew how to give a newly-dead body the semblance of decay—a month's residence in the sluggish waters bearing out the ghastly truth. As for the rest—that was easy. The mutilation of the water-soaked clothing having faint initials somewhere to identify the body, needed only the efforts of a master in swindling.

Everything was ready.

"We shall hear of it here on Wednesday night or Thursday morning. And this is Monday; there is but one night between. I must see Vida before then. Ah, yes, of course—she will doubtless be at Mrs. Frankland's ball on Wednesday night. I'll carry out my original plan—then."

A moment later he threw out his arms and laughed.

"Forbidden to ride with her to-day! Very well. Forbidden to enter her home in future! Very well. What matters it? Soon her home will be my home, and *Finis* will have been written to Sidney Raritan's career. It's likely he'll be sent to prison for life, as the evidence won't be absolutely convincing after this lapse of time; but it's more than probable he will escape that by killing himself. An old grudge—one of long standing—will be paid, and the woman I have always loved will be my wife."

If Clyde Hastings made an attempt to justify his treachery to himself it was by saying that he did not believe Sidney Raritan worthy the love of a woman like Vida, as, despite all lack of positive proof, he considered him the murderer of Allan Love. In his opinion, Markby, through fraud, was bringing a real offender

to justice. He believed that the end condoned the means employed.

Meanwhile, after leaving the house, Sidney had gone direct to the office of a steamship company, and had engaged passage for himself and Vida on the following Thursday. It was a peremptory action, perhaps, and quite different from Sidney's usual method with Vida. Now she was to have no choice—she must go with him—she would go if she loved him at all—and he would never be content until he had put the ocean between her and the man who was secretly trying to ruin their lives.

Besides they had long talked of a trip to Europe. Then why not go now when it suited his plans so well? Bebé could be left with his mother's sister in Washington, Applethorpe could be closed, and they need not return for a year at least. His business affairs had never been in better hands or better taken care of.

He reached Applethorpe just as the maid was announcing luncheon, and Vida was startled to see him enter—startled by his worn, young face bearing the marks of sudden and deep sadness.

"Oh, you are back early," cried Bebé. "Is Felix coming to dinner just the same?"

Like one awakening from sleep, Sidney passed his hand over his face.

"Poor Beb, I quite forgot."

"Forgot about Felix!" pouted Bebé. "Then I know what I'll do—I'll send Ruggles down on horseback with a note to him. May I?"

"Certainly, dear; anything you like."

Luncheon was rather a silent meal. Before the servants a strained conversation was kept up, but it was easy to see that something was troubling Sidney. Even Bebé became silent.

When, at length, Vida was alone with him, she turned and looked anxiously into his eyes.

"What's the matter, Sidney? You look like a man who has received a blow," she said, a tremble in her soft, velvety tones.

"No matter. Do not ask me, Vida," he said, quietly. "But I want to tell you this—Clyde Hastings must never again cross the threshold of this house—and you will come with me to Europe on Thursday."

She grew white to the lips.

"You have quarreled with Clyde Hastings?"

"I have told him my opinion of him. Let his name never be mentioned between us again."

A pain like a needle shot through Vida's heart, and she grew white and cold. Something in Sidney's face awed and stilled her.

He did not touch her hand. There was none of the old love in his attitude or glance; only a calm more sad than passionate reproaches.

"You will be ready to go with me on Thursday. It will be best so. Believe me when I tell you. It will be best."

"Yes, I will go," she answered, and love was very strong in her heart as she spoke.

If she could only have back the old faith! If she had never listened to Clyde Hastings! If she had never seen that name—Aloha!

"I will try to believe him. I will help him. He looked wounded to the heart. Oh, Sidney, I will believe you, my love!"





CHAPTER XXI.

IMPRISONED.

The wintry dusk was deepening with surprising swiftness as Felix Love rode rapidly on toward Applethorpe. Already the west was a mass of cold purple, and in the tawny gloom above a few stars had gathered.

There was something in the poise of his head, in the satisfied glow in his eyes, which spoke of exultation. He had travelled over these roads so often before, but never with the joy in his heart that now welled there—never with the prospect before him of seeing Bebé freely, openly, of spending hours with her in her own home, which he entered as a lover.

No fears, no doubts troubled his young heart. Once having decided that his suspicions of Sidney Raritan were an insult to the man, and realizing that no tangible proof connected him with his father's disappearance, he had been quick to admit his mistake and ask pardon for his unjust suspicions.

Meanwhile his father's fate remained a mystery. Every attempt at finding a clue resulted in a silence as complete as death. No one had seen Allan Love after that snowy night when he went away with Sidney Raritan; no one had heard from him.

Could a man live and so completely seclude himself? The joy in Felix's heart subsided a little as he pondered upon that question. Would he ever know, or would the maddening, terrible word "missing" forever overhang his mysterious fate?

"Who knows," thought Felix, with sudden, obstinate hopefulness, "perhaps some unforeseen trifle, some strange turning of the wheel of destiny may reveal all that now seems so inexplicable. I feel sure that somehow or other I will one day hear of my father, or stand face to face with him again."

Putting away the perplexing problem, he let himself dwell on his love for Bebé, on what their lives would be together.

Hope, confidence, passion, reverence, were all in that young vision which fired his brain and heart, and he felt he had never known the meaning of life until now, when his happiness was bound securely and entirely in one small pair of hands.

He looked at his watch as he entered the road which, about half a mile distant, led past Applethorpe. It needed ten minutes of six.

Provoking! They did not dine until seven, and he would probably reach the house at a most inconvenient time—perhaps when Bebé was at her toilet.

To kill an intervening twenty minutes he took a circuitous path that, deep in shadow, skirted a small river, which reflected the varied colors of the evening sky.

For a long way the path was singularly deserted, and only the regular beat of his horse's footfalls broke the evening calm.

"To think," mused Felix, "that this place is really a suburb of the big town that lies to the south, a wilderness of brick and stone, filled with the turmoil

of traffic. One might as well be in the very heart of a mountain solitude. Not a house in sight, not a sound of life, no movement but the sway of the branches and the soft, velvety flow of the river—What 's that?"

The last words came in a low, dazed exclamation, as Felix, holding his horse well in, leaned forward and peered into the darkness at a figure which had crossed the path to the bank beyond.

There was something so uncanny about the muffled form, he felt his blood grow thin and cold. It was as if a ghost had put on dark, heavy, formless folds to match the darkness in which it moved.

The figure stood just back of a large tree, and Felix saw the draped arm raised, the cowl lifted a little. But what lay beyond he could not tell. No feature was disclosed, and the light of the eyes, if eyes there were, was hidden.

As he paused curiously, the figure gave a start and a strange, strangled sort of wail. The sound not only made the listener's heart quicken with that haunting, inexpressible power of the mysterious, but his horse gave a violent leap, a snort, and then, with rearing head and straining mouth, leaped forward.

Felix realized that the moment was full of peril. He forgot all about the monk-like traveller, and bent all his strength to the taming of his now thoroughly frightened horse. It was useless; the nervous, blooded creature had flung off all control, and, with the bit securely between its teeth, tore wildly on.

Just ahead lay the pasture where he and Beb had had their never-to-be-forgotten twilight talk in August, and the stile separating it from the road was now a serious barrier to further progress. In vain Felix tried to twist his feet from the stirrups and jump,

even at the risk of his neck. He was firmly in the saddle when the horse, at full tilt, rushed against the bars, only to be flung backward. Horse and rider went down, and Felix felt himself hurled with cruel force against a rock to the right hand.

He tried to rise, although the swimming pain in his head blinded him, but fell back, his last conscious knowledge being that the horse's hoof had struck his shoulder and chest, as he turned to bound away in the other direction.

Not more than twenty minutes had passed when a stumbling old man came toward the spot where he lay, looking eagerly to the right and left. At sight of Felix lying with upturned face, the marks of blood and dust on throat and cheek, a quivering cry of gladness and fear broke the silence.

"'Yas, 't is Mas'r Felix! Daid? No, but mighty neah it!" and old Remus—for it was he—bent over the silent body.

"Drag him into the shade of the trees quickly! There's some one coming!" said a peremptory voice from the sheltered bank opposite.

"Yas 'r," answered Remus.

"Now go as fast as your legs can carry you and get Griggs. Get him out here on whatever pretext you like; but don't come back without him."

The men whose voices had been heard came on, laughing and smoking, not dreaming that behind the trees at the entrance to the meadow lay an unconscious man, guarded by an old negro and on the other side by a shrouded form, which seemed as devoid of life as the tree against which he leaned.

As soon as the way was clear, old Remus hurried to Applethorpe, and in twenty minutes returned with the detective.

"See here, Fairleigh, it will never do summoning me this way whenever you take the whim. Remember I I'm paid wages over there in my rôle as valet, and I have a few duties to perform. Mr. Raritan doesn't think me sufficiently beautiful to hand out his shekels just to have me in the house as a sort of ornament. Now, what is it?"

"Didn't Remus tell you?"

"Oh, he was muttering something about Felix Love and a horse running away—"

"Look there," said the tenant of the house by the river. And following the inclined arm, Griggs saw the senseless figure, the white face of Felix Love.

"Good heavens! Unconscious! How in thunder are we going to get him to Applethorpe? They're waiting dinner for them over by this time."

"He's not going to Applethorpe."

"No! What—why—"

"Please don't waste words asking questions, Griggs. I want you and Remus to lift him—to my home."

"The deuce you do! And what in thunder are you going to do with him when you get him there?"

"Your tone is an insult. Your suspicions are absurd. Are you a fool? I'd see you dead, and twenty like you, rather than have a hair of this boy's head injured. Do you understand?" And the words came thickly, passionately. "I knew his father—*well*," Mr. Fairleigh added, as if explaining his enthusiasm.

"I'll wager you did, and no one knew him better," was Griggs's thought. "Well, I suppose, as I'm under your orders, I must obey and ask no questions—at least at present. Come on, Remus."

Between them they lifted the well-knit lithe figure and bore it to the silent house on the river bank.

The settled blackness of a chill night was brooding

over the land as they carried Felix in. How many days would dawn and die, nights come and go, ere he stepped from those doors again!

"Not here—not near me," said Mr. Fairleigh. "Take him upstairs to the room in the attic."

It was with chill grace that Theodore Griggs obeyed, but at last the task was done, and Felix lay on a small cot.

"Remus will know what to do for him," said Mr. Fairleigh. "Come, let us go down." But before following Griggs, he paused to say to the old servant: "Remember, have no light in the room, and when you bring him back to consciousness, remember he is not to see you."

A moment later he faced Griggs in the room below.

"Well, what does this action mean? What are you going to do with him?" asked Griggs, sharply. "I won't have anything crooked in this game, you understand! You hired me as a watcher, but once let there be any tricky work and I wash my hands of the whole concern."

Mr. Fairleigh sat down, and Griggs could see the trembling of his body under the close brown cloak.

"Good heavens, man, you madden me by your suspicions! You ask my meaning. It is this: Felix Love, you tell me, is to marry Bebé Raritan, the sister of the man who ruined, perhaps killed, his father. He dare not! I want him here for the present. In a little while he will be free to go. At that time he will realize what a gulf lies between this girl and him. He will know that heaven and earth might better meet than that he should make her his wife."

"What are you going to do?" asked Griggs, curiously.

"At present, nothing. Now you had better return

and see if they are still waiting dinner for him. Come here to-morrow."

"All right. I'm in your employ, Fairleigh, and you pay like a prince; but no foul play! That's all I insist on—no foul play!"

He retreated, and Mr. Fairleigh stood alone facing the closed door.

"He does not know for what I am waiting, and it is coming soon—soon. He does not dream that while I have paid him to watch Sidney Raritan, I have had another watching Clyde Hastings. Ah, the moment for which I have longed and prayed will soon be here! I have tasted the brackish waters of death—and lived. The cup is near Sidney Raritan's lips now. Patience—a little longer."





CHAPTER XXII.

THE PEACE BEFORE THE STORM.

No night in Bebé's life had ever dragged like this one, on which she had waited for her lover's coming, and waited in vain.

"I don't understand it," she had said and thought a hundred times. "If he had not sent an answer back by Ruggles I would not think it so strange. Something must have happened—something very unlooked-for and very important."

The pretty face was clouded, and her heart very heavy. Vida and Sidney treated the matter lightly. He had been called out of town, perhaps—some business had prevented—it would be explained in the morning.

But dinner was a doleful meal. There was a restraint between the husband and wife, which, though scarcely visible, could be felt. Despite Vida's sudden, remorseful love and the burning desire to give Sidney all the old love and faith, "the little rift within the lute" had left some faint, false notes in the music.

The night passed almost silently. Sidney had many letters to write, preparatory to his departure abroad; Bebé felt some ease for the disappointment in her heart by playing a succession of minor chords from the soul of the grand piano; and Vida, in her trailing black gown, sat before the wood-fire, her eyes impenetrable, her hands locked in her lap.

It was a night she was to remember when this scene would be of the past, and peace a stranger to her heart. Plaintive and sweet came the blended harmonies from the shadowy corner. The wind sighing outside made the warmth and quiet more cozy and delightful, and Vida tried to quiet the doubts still lurking in her heart—tried to accept all that she could not explain and believe in Sidney as sincerely as she loved him.

Suddenly the music ceased, and Bebé crossed the line of firelight and sank on her knees beside Vida's chair.

"Hasn't the wind an eerie sound to-night?" she questioned, giving a chilly shrug of her plump shoulders. "It almost seems as if some one were knocking at the window. I remember a story one of the English teachers used to tell us at school, that the wind held the voices of the disembodied spirits returning to the scenes where they spent their lives; a soft, plaintive wind that only sighs and sighs comes from a soul that left earth peacefully, but these wild, uncanny shriekings which one hears, sometimes, are the voices of people who died violently. Listen—the wind is rising—there is going to be a storm. Oh, I feel so cold, so unhappy!"

"You are a bit fanciful, Bebé!" and Vida's hand strayed tenderly over the bowed head. "In the morning, in the sunlight, these fancies will all leave you."

Bebé raised her head and her blue eyes were a little misty and defiant.

"Why do you and Sidney rush off to Europe in this mad style? I call it a beastly shame," she said, in one of her wild bursts.

"Well, you can come with us if you like. I rather fancied, however, that you would prefer to remain in America as long as a certain young man had his home

in Uncle Sam's dominions. Just as you like, dear. If you would rather come with us than stay with your aunt in Washington, Sidney would be delighted."

"No, I think not," and a conscious blush overspread Bebé's lovely face. "But I don't see why you two want to do that either. I thought that in another fortnight we'd be back in town, in time for the Horse Show, and from then until the end of the season I'd have the sort of good time every *débutante* expects. Now, without a moment's warning, comes this European rush. Why? Why?"

It would be impossible for Vida to admit that she was unable to explain Sidney's impulse, and, in a lazy tone she answered :

"You see, *petite*, Sidney and I have often talked of going abroad. It happens that just now Wall Street and everything else is in a favorable condition for the flight, so Sidney, like so many rich men, follows an impulse to get rid of the season's conventional obligations, and travel. Being able to fling off responsibilities is one of the luxuries of life. That's all there is to it."

"Well, I don't like it. You sail Thursday. But you're going to Mrs. Frankland's ball to-morrow night?" she added, with feverish anxiety. "You'll never miss that. A Russian prince will be there, and an English duke and a Turkish ambassador—"

"To say nothing of Mr. Felix Love," added Vida, laughing lightly and pinching the girl's pink cheek. "Yes, we'll go. The vessel doesn't sail the next day until four o'clock in the afternoon, and we'll have plenty of time to rest before going. What will you wear?"

"Why, my new white, with the daisy trimming, of course!" cried Bebé, almost indignantly.

"Pardon me, Miss Raritan. To think I should have forgotten the new white with the daisy trimming!"

"And what will you wear? Oh, Vida, your scarlet gown—the new velvet! You look simply heavenly in that!"

"Scarlet, my dear? It's a sort of orange-red, and tremendously low at the shoulders. I was going to have it altered."

"I wouldn't have you take it up an inch—you have such divine shoulders—and in that gown they look simply brilliant. Then if I were you I wouldn't wear a single gem with it except your big diamond star in the front of your hair. In that rig, if you don't bring down the prince, the duke, the Turk and every one—"

"Except Mr. Felix Love, of course. Go on."

"I'll be very much surprised."

An hour later Applethorpe was wrapped in slumber. but the wee sma' hours of the night had passed before the light was extinguished in the lower window of the house by the river.

Bebé was the first one down to breakfast the next morning, and fairly pounced on the mail that lay beside her plate. The letters slipped through her fingers while an expression of pain and pride succeeded the blank amazement which had overspread her face. There were notes from her school-friends, one from her riding-master, but the masculine writing she had expected to see was not there; no letter of explanation came from Felix Love.

"I don't undersfand it! I don't understand it at all!" were the words that rang in Bebé's brain, while a burning sob rose in her throat. "Why didn't he come? That was strange enough. But why hasnt' he written? Perhaps he expects to ride up during the morning."

But despite this last hopeful assurance, a very irritating pain held Bebé's heart as if in a grasp of steel, while she sat in the sunny breakfast-room, pretending to taste the food which had been placed before her.

Vida, noticing her pale cheeks, refrained from questioning her, surmising something was wrong, but Sidney, not having a woman's tact, asked abruptly :

"Well, what was the matter with Felix last night, if I may ask, missy?"

"I—don't know," came the listless reply.

"Why, hasn't he sent an excuse this morning?"

"No—I thought he would. He hasn't."

"He'll be up before the morning has passed," said Vida, calmly, giving Bebé a smile. "It will be such a pretty *dénouement* to see him come clattering up unexpectedly to make his explanation."

But the morning came and went—so did the afternoon, and dinner had arrived, and still no word had come from Felix.

Wonder had given place to anger in Bebé's mind, and Vida felt resentful at this treatment of her little sister.

But Sidney, pacing the balcony in the young, blustering night, smoking an after-dinner cigar, smiled scornfully, as he wondered if Felix's absence could not be explained by his having repented of his recent apology and harboring a renewal of his former suspicions of himself.

"He'll be at the ball to-night, and then we'll see," was the thought in the minds of all.

At ten o'clock the lights in the great, square hall shed their luster upon a lovely sight. Bebé's fresh, flower-like beauty was intensified by the mist-like draperies that floated hazily around her with every light step: the daisies starring the gauze, the pearl daisies clasping the full sleeves, and the great bouquet

of the same flowers mixed with valley lilies and fuzzy, wild grasses gave her the look of a wood nymph.

There was something terrible in Vida's beauty as she swept the length of the hall in the orange-red velvet which an empress could not have worn with half her grace. Contrasting with the glowing color, her arms and shoulders were dazzling, and the star blazing in her golden hair had rivals in the light of her dark, starry eyes.

"Oh, Vida, I cannot take my eyes from you!" murmured Bebé, as she gazed at her rapturously. "It is not fair that you should have so much beauty."

"Foolish child, such a complaint does not flatter me. Haven't you gazed in your mirror?" asked Vida, still feeling the delight which the consciousness of loveliness alone can give.

"Don't come within twenty yards of me," cried Bebé, just as Sidney entered. "That superb gown dwarfs me horribly, Mr. Raritan," the girl continued, dropping a courtsey; "your wife does you honor. Did you ever see her look so lovely?"

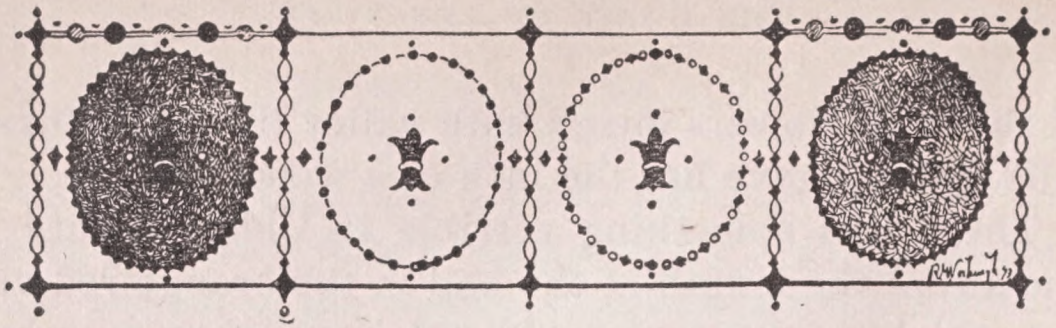
For a moment Sidney stood surveying Vida critically.

"Well?" she asked, tapping her foot impatiently.

"I was thinking that only a bit of ermine was needed to make you an ideal queen of the magnificent past—one of those having a court jester and a troubadour, who would pause between two bites of a strawberry to order a rival's head struck off."

"A two-edged compliment, upon my word—comparing me to a barbarous queen with a penchant for disconnected heads!"

Bebé had run out to get her cloak, and Vida let her arm close around Sidney's. A thrill of deep happiness went through him—something sweeter and truer than he had felt in a long time. He bent his head and kissed the proffered lips.



CHAPTER XXIII.

MRS. FRANKLAND'S BALL.

Mrs. Frankland's ball, besides being the first of the season given in town, was destined to be remembered as the most brilliant. No succeeding ball approached it. There was a reason for this. Mrs. Frankland was comparatively new in New York—she had nothing but her plurality of millions to recommend her, and her footing in the golden house of society was not as assured as her ambition demanded it should be. She was past the threshold, but she wanted the sweep of the place and the privilege to enter, at last, the inner sanctorum presided over by the powerful and the favored few.

For this reason Mrs. Frankland had returned after a year's absence abroad, a prince and a duke in her wake who did her the honor of permitting themselves to be lionized. A fortune was spent on flowers; her house, like an English castle on a city street, outrivaled all others; she had arranged that, between the dances, a *musicale* should be held in the smaller, white ball-room, and that none but singers of first repute, whose golden notes demanded golden showers of money, should delight the guests she was privileged to honor.

No wonder such a scene of wealth and beauty almost took the breath out of Bebé's little body. She had dreamed of fairyland, she had a vague idea of Paradise, but the mansion she entered that night surpassed them all. Lights of various hues, like great tropical flowers aflame, sent shivering lances of glory on a scene made up of dazzling trifles. The flowers, the bare shoulders of women, the sheen of satins, the halls and rooms rich in antique furnishings, which lent a somber, oriental aspect to the place; the magical, never-ceasing strains of music, sometimes not louder than a sigh; the far-off, velvety notes from the throat of a famous singer, coming like an angel's message over the heads of the throng—oh, it was beautiful, ecstatic:

But one thing marred the pleasure of the never-to-be-forgotten night—Felix was not there. Though she danced continually, had her share of admiration and coquetted in a reckless fashion, there was a feeling of awe at Bebé's heart, a certainty that something mysterious and far out in the dark was keeping Felix from her side. She thought of the barrier he had once told her must separate them. Did that loom again between their lives? What if he had found those suspicions true! What if something reflecting on her brother did, indeed, keep them irrevocably apart?

Still she danced and flirted, no hint of her heart's pain showing in her laughing blue eyes. The excitement was like a tonic—she would take it and drink it drop by drop. Ah, there was time enough by and by, when the glitter and the music belonged to the past—time enough then to weep and wonder! So the little feet tripped lightly, and the pretty lips smiled.

But Bebé's successes were small and unimportant beside Vida's complete triumph. She was the beauty

par excellence, and homage was poured at her feet. Russian prince and English duke and Turkish diplomat vied with one another in paying tribute to her. Between the dances she was surrounded by admirers, old and young. The excitement and glamour of it all lent a life to her face that made it more radiant than was usual ; her laughter was soft, spontaneous, happy. It was a night of victory, and amid its pleasure the small discords of her life were forgotten.

Sidney, of course, devoted himself to other women, but he was proud of his wife, proud of her success, and from afar he watched her beauty shining like a star.

"What have I done to deserve such a peerless being as the sharer of my life?" he thought. "She loves me. That is the simple explanation of the whole mystery," and his heart grew warm and joyous. "No wonder Clyde Hastings envies me so bitterly. He has spent his manhood in loving her without avail. Yes, without avail!" he repeated in his heart. "He is not here to-night, yet she does not miss him, and to-morrow she is going willingly with me to other countries, where he will not follow, and where we two, she and I, will be more dependent on each other for happiness than we are now."

If the memory of Vida's miniature in Clyde Hastings's possession rose to trouble and thwart him a little, he put the doubt from him with indifference.

"He must have stolen the photograph. He is quite equal to doing such a thing. The miniature was copied from that, and I don't believe Vida knew anything about his having either," he said.

To-morrow! To-morrow! The thought was full of contentment for him. Mixed with the strains of waltz music he seemed in fancy to hear the throb of the

great ship that would bear him and Vida far away for a respite from all dissensions, to new scenes, to happiness.

It was almost one o'clock. Vida had just come from the dressing-room, where she had gone for a moment's rest, and was standing in the shade of a rich tapestry curtain that divided the picture gallery from the ball-room. Her partner for the cotillion just forming would claim her in a moment, and she snatched a quiet moment to look down on the brilliant scene of which she had been such a conspicuous figure.

Near a great bank of palms she saw Bebé deep in a flirtation with a young naval officer. Sidney was not in the ball-room, and as at that moment she heard the notes of the *prima donna's* voice in one of the airs from "Rigoletto," she thought he was probably there.

"Poor little Bebé! For all her smiles, her heart is sore to-night, I'll warrant. That provoking Felix! I wonder where he is? His continued absence and silence are more than strange. Something must have happened. He would never have been guilty of this rudeness. We must find out to-morrow, if possible, for Bebé's sake."

"I beg pardon. You are Mrs. Raritan?"

Vida turned and saw a trim waiting-maid at her side, holding out a letter.

"A servant just brought this, if you please. He wished it delivered to you without delay."

Vida took it and retreated to the dressing-room. Her heart had commenced to throb painfully. A feeling of nervous excitement chilled her. She had recognized the writing as Clyde Hastings's.

It contained these words:

"Have you none of the curiosity of your sex? Do you not wonder why your husband has so summarily put an end to our

friendship—why he is spiriting you off to Europe to-morrow? There is an explanation, and one of most vital importance to you. What if I tell you that the whole mysterious course of action comes from my refusal to give up a certain package of letters to him? What if I tell you that these letters prove he was already married when you became his wife? What if that first Mrs. Raritan is still alive—the Aloha of whom you spoke to me not long ago? More than this, he is a murderer. I know it. He knows this, and hence his hatred of me. Yes, Mrs. Raritan, I can prove all this by giving the letters into your possession. You can come and see them, if you trust my sincerity and friendship. My rooms are but a stone's throw from where you are, as you know. If you do not care to heed this warning or decide to ignore it, you can, of course, remain the willing dupe of a man not worthy your love or my respect. This is the true explanation of his hatred of me. The explanation of my concern for your future you know lies in the fact that your happiness must always be dearer to me than my own. It rests with yourself to save yourself. The letters are here. To-morrow will be too late."

Had the letter urged her passionately or insistently to seek the proof spoken of, it is likely Vida would have been skeptical, even though troubled. But the deliberate tone, the cold setting forth of facts, leaving it to herself to decide, influenced her, as Clyde Hastings knew it would do.

"You are the one whose future is at stake, you are the one to resent this wrong; the crime is against you, not me," the letter seemed to say. "You will solve the truth of what I say, if you are wise. If not, go your way."

She stood as if stricken of all life, the letter crushed in her hands. Every trifle needing explanation returned now with threefold emphasis, and she felt a wild anguish, a resentful jealousy rise like a wave in her soul.

How peacefully she had accepted her husband's de-

cision that Clyde Hastings should be stricken from her list of friends—how amiably she had promised to go on this blind journey with him on the morrow! And now—and now—it lay in this man's power to show her she had been cheated.

Had her judgment, her senses been sleeping? Why had she not questioned? Why had she not insisted on an explanation of these strange happenings, strange commands?

She loved Sidney—yes, she loved him with every side of her nature—but if this thing were true—if he had wronged her in this brutal way, she must know it—and accept the dishonor, the misery of it all.

For a moment she stood hesitating. The thought of the journey on the following day rose before her. She must act, and quickly; those letters must be in her possession before the night ended.

It was impossible to leave the place unseen, but she was reckless of small consequences now. Her maid helped her on with her fur cloak, wondering the while at her pale face.

“You need not come, Marie. I—I—will be only a few moments. If Mr. Raritan asks for me, say you do not know where I have gone, but that if he waits for me here, I will return before the ball has ended. Now let me slip out this way. That will do. Say nothing unless Mr. Raritan misses me—you understand?”

The hall was almost deserted as she ran down. The crowds were now divided between the cotillion, the music-room and the supper-rooms. In a few moments she had swept past the butler into the cold, quiet street. A line of carriages extended along the curb, most of the drivers sitting on their boxes with locked arms and heads bowed sleepily. She was just wondering how to

get a carriage to take her on her errand, when a footman stepped up and addressed her :

“I am Mr. Hastings’s man. I brought the letter—and if you are—”

“Yes, yes !” she interrupted hastily. “Drive me away at once !”

He sprang lightly to the seat, and, in a moment, she was whirled up the avenue to the apartment house whose telescopic height shown darkly against the cold, violet sky.

In the gloom of the brougham Vida bowed her white face on her hands.

“Perhaps I am mad to come—but the old devil of distrust is aroused. Oh, it is all true—he would not dare otherwise—no—no, it is all true ; I know it. Oh, Sidney—Sidney !”

A sob of anguish broke from her lips. She looked like a ghost of the beautiful woman who had so recently moved among the admiring crowd. The letter she had received was buried in her bosom and its sharp edges brushed her flesh like a lancet’s edge.

The carriage brushed the curb harshly, and came to a halt at Clyde Hastings’s door.





CHAPTER XXIV.

FACE TO FACE.

A moment later, Vida stood tapping at the door of the apartment where the name "HASTINGS" appeared on a small, oblong brass plate. She knew this was one of the most vital moments of her life. Her heart was leaping like a mad thing, a dull, sickly pain surging through her, and every fiber quivering with excitement, dread, anguish.

At last the door was opened, and she swept hurriedly past the servant into the dainty, little drawing-room, where at a small table on which a shaded lamp stood, Clyde Hastings sat reading.

He rose as if startled, when his eyes fell on Vida.

"You did come!" he said, in a low, impressive tone. "You did come!"

There was something queenly, something challenging in Vida's attitude as she stood before him, her head lifted, her lovely face so pitifully pale, the rich cloak falling from her bare shoulders, yet held partially in place by the firm grasp of her hand.

"Yes," she said, in a breathless whisper, "I had to come. The letters—where are they? Give them to me! I have only a moment! I want to see those letters!"

"You will sit down first" and Clyde drew an arm-chair nearer to the fire,

"This is not the moment for idle ceremony. The letters! The letters!" and her dark eyes glowed somberly like brilliants.

"You are impatient. No wonder;" and he took his position on the hearth, while he faced her, a look in his eyes such as a master wears when endeavoring by sheer force of will to quell a passionate, dumb brute. "But you must hear me first. I have a few words to say."

A low sob, half anger, half pain, broke from Vida's lips, and she leaned against the high back of a chair to keep from sinking in her weakness.

"Oh, how can you torture me so? Don't you see how I am suffering? Don't you know what this means to me? I have imperiled my name to come here to see the awful proof you say you have! Give the letters to me, or let me see the words with my own eyes, and let me go. I ask no more! If you are doing me a service in this—if you are my friend—though bitter woe comes as my portion, I will thank you by and by, but not now. I only want to get the letters—and go."

She held out her trembling hands in a gesture of command and appeal, but the man before her stood unmoved as a sphinx.

"Will you listen to me? There is one question you must answer—"

"Oh, there are conditions now! You made none in your letter, Mr. Hastings. I was mad to come—mad to suppose you would keep your word. The information you possess is not worth the price you seem to insist on, since the delay here means ruin to me."

She swept toward the door, paused in pitiful hesitation, and covered her ghastly face with her hands. What was she going to do? If she left the place now without any definite knowledge of her husband's un-

worthiness, and yet with all her nature roused to a frenzy of jealous suspicion, her pride quivering—what attitude could she take to Sidney on the morrow when he expected her to leave America with him?

“Yes, you had better come back,” said Clyde, still at the fire, and his soothing tone made the quick blood leap to her cheek. “Don’t act like a schoolgirl. Be a woman, and look the circumstances of your life in the face.”

“Speak—and in pity’s name hurry!” she moaned, sinking into a chair just beyond the line of light. “What have you to say to me?”

“That’s better.” He looked at the clock—she had been absent from the ball-room half an hour. Every moment counted to his advantage.

He moved, in a slow, leisurely way that maddened Vida, to a secretary in a corner near which she sat. She heard the key turn in the lock; she saw him bend forward eagerly, and thrust his hand into a narrow compartment. A low sound of surprise broke from him. He stood for a moment as if amazed, then commenced hastily tossing over the contents of the desk.

Like one enthralled, she sat watching his face—the knit brows, the flashing eyes, the compressed lips, the passionate gestures of the hands as papers were tossed about.

At length, with a groan, he staggered back and placed his hand to his brow. She stood up, and, like one fascinated by something she dreaded, gazed at him spellbound.

“Something has happened!” came from her white lips. “What is it? Speak! Speak!”

“The letters!” he groaned. “The letters—are gone! He—stole them!”

"Who? What do you mean?"

"I mean that when Sidney Raritan was here the day before yesterday—when I waved those letters in his face and refused all the splendid offers he made to purchase them—he saw where I placed them. He stole them! He has them now!"

Vida remembered Sidney's early return on the day mentioned, his distant look, his chilling reference to Clyde Hastings, his announcement of their hurried voyage. These events gave the coloring of truth to the words that now rang in her ears. Added to these, Clyde Hastings seemed beside himself with rage.

"Well, he has tricked me finely," he muttered, as he stood with clenched hands and frowning brow. "He has won—so far."

Vida was gazing at him in fascinated horror. His expression, his words, meant that her visit had been in vain—that she had dared all for nothing. A feeling of despair coursed through her, and all, for a second, grew black before her eyes.

"What shall I do? What is there to be done?" her lips murmured, almost mechanically.

"I'll tell you what to do," said Clyde, his voice now like ice, and calm in a maddening way. "Go back to your husband. Take him on trust. Fall in with his plans when he wishes to spirit you away to a safe, foreign place. Forget what I have said. Bury your doubts; crush your fears. I cannot prove Sidney Raritan the villain I know him to be. The letters which branded him he has stolen, and I am unarmed. Go back to him, and quickly—go!"

He moved toward the door and flung it wide open. Vida rose, tremblingly, her stunned gaze still fixed upon his pale, quiet face.

Yes, he was right, and he was just. There was

nothing to be done. She might as well go back and fight the fight out as best she could. She might accuse without proof, and what good would it do? She might pray to be told the truth, but since Sidney's love had made him commit this sin to gain her, how could she hope for the truth and confidence now?

There was such a bitter ache in her throat! There was such a blinding pain in her heart!

Her beauty, the splendor of her gown and jewels, made her heartsickness and desperation but the more apparent. Nothing seemed real to her as she rose, with a shadowy intention of obeying Clyde Hastings's command. The world seemed to have sunk in a sea of shadows, and her desire to live had gone with it.

For a second she paused in her passage to the door, and her eyes met Clyde's in a long, steady, deep gaze. He shrank at the look; every pulse throbbed madly. A fierce desire to take her in his arms and comfort her swept through him, but he conquered the feeling; he had a part to play, and he would play it well, at whatever cost in the present moment to himself.

"Clyde Hastings—Clyde Hastings," came slowly, weakly from Vida's lips, her deep, dark eyes still upon his face, as if she would pierce to and read his very heart, "to-night you have told me a thing which must forever alter my life, if it is true. I had rather be dead than believe it. You can gain nothing by lying to me. You can break my heart by the truth. Yet I would hear all if it is true."

Her lips trembled, a wave of anguish convulsed her beautiful face, and there was something childish, wistful in the glance she bent upon him.

"Answer me," she murmured, "just as if you were dying and soon must meet God. The horror I have listened to to-night is true?"

"Every syllable. I am sorry to pain you, but you should never have married Raritan had he not managed that with secrecy, through fear. I could have saved you from all pain then. Now I can only save you from living a lie any longer. A woman lives who is his rightful wife—and he is a murderer."

"A murderer!" came in a gasp from Vida's drawn lips. "And you knew of this—before?"

"My dear Mrs. Raritan—" Clyde commenced, and then paused abruptly. "No, I will call you that no longer. Vida—Vida, you have no right to that other name—you are now and always have been Vida to me." He half shut the door, and in a tender, respectful way, which must have soothed any woman in Vida's position, he took her hand and said: "God knows what it has cost me to do this—to tell you all—to tear down the fabric of your dream. But—better you should know it now, even at this late day, than hear it first as a shock when Sidney Raritan is called to the stand for the murder of—Allan Love."

He saw a look of shuddering comprehension leap into her eyes, and her fingers clutched his as if for help.

"Allan Love!" she echoed.

"Yes, the father of Felix Love was Sidney Raritan's closest friend, then bitterest enemy. They both loved the same woman—Aloha Brysdale. Allan Love disappeared. No one could openly accuse Raritan of murdering him, but every one, including Felix, suspected him. I learn now that the body has been found, and with it proof that Raritan murdered him. Now do you understand his attitude to Felix Love, and the mystery connected with it? Now do you understand why he married secretly? Now do you recognize the significance of the letters from Aloha in England? I

discovered but yesterday that she is a hopeless invalid dying, and has spent the past year in a sanitarium on the English coast. She has prayed to him to come to her for a last good-by. His conscience would not permit him to refuse that request. He intended leaving America for two reasons—to see her, and because he fears that the net is tightening around him here. He would not leave you behind, because he feared that I might enlighten you. Now is it clear? You have been, tricked by a master of deceit; you have given the pure, sweet love of your woman's heart to one not worthy to touch the hem of your skirt. My poor Vida, God help you !”

She swayed backward, and against the crimson Turkish stuff on the chair; her face was drained of the hue of life; her lashes closed; a moan of mortal pain came from her lips. Life seemed ended.*

“Vida! Vida! for heaven's sake! Speak to me! Look up; remember where you are. Remember you must go.” And Clyde, leaning over her tenderly, placed his hands upon her shoulders.

He had heard the grating of the elevator door and a hurried footstep. He was not surprised when the door was pushed open and Sidney Raritan stood on the threshold.





CHAPTER XXV.

AN UNEXPECTED CLIMAX.

In a life there are many moments fraught with deep meaning, with keen pain or joy, but there is often one which, on looking back, seems to hold within its own small compass the crowded agony or bliss of years.

Such a moment came to Sidney Raritan as he paused just within the door and looked, not at Clyde Hastings, but straight into Vida's dark eyes.

Everything in his life had slipped away from him—the scene of gayety from which he had come, the journey he had anticipated on the morrow. Everything was vague but this one awful, appalling fact—his wife had covered his name with dishonor. Surely the bitterness of death was small and bearable beside the anguish crucifying him as he faced the wreck of his faith.

Vida started up, a wildness seizing her, a storm of tears sweeping away the deathly calm which had held her in thrall.

“Don't—don't look at me that way!” she cried. “How dare you? Oh, how dare you? What is this night? Is it a horrid dream? Oh, will I awake and find that nothing is as it seems? What shall I do? Sidney! Sidney!”

She broke down, flung out her arms and buried her face on them. She was praying to die, because life could never again be as it was. She did not in the excitement of the moment clearly realize how her presence in Clyde Hastings's chambers might be misunderstood. When she looked again at Sidney, she fairly quivered under the burning contempt in his eyes.

What did it mean? There was no guilt in his face—nothing that could be construed into fear. Somehow the accusing hand seemed to have been turned and was pointing at her—at her!

As she arose and held out her hands, Clyde Hastings, who was smarting more under Sidney's studied unconsciousness of him than if he had scourged him with words that cut like knives, drew back a little, prepared to watch the scene on the outcome of which his success or failure with Vida must depend.

"Sidney, I came here to-night—" she began. But her husband stopped her.

"Not one word! Not one word!" he said, and his voice was like the strokes of steel upon steel. "Nothing you might say could make you spotless again with me! Don't enter into a discussion of what feelings prompted you to put yourself in the power of this man who has so long pursued you. Words are useless between us. I have done with you forever!"

"What do you mean? You think—you think— Oh, how can you look at me, accuse me, knowing what you have done—knowing what your life has been?" she cried, flinging her cloak quite from her and standing straight and stately before him, her face worn from feeling and pitifully pallid.

She had seen many aspects of her husband's character, but never knew what grim determination could beat down every softer sentiment in Sidney's soul. It

was this dogged steadfastness to a purpose which had helped to make him a rich man, and the same feeling was strong in him now—to forget her sweetness and the deep love he bore her, to forget what his pain must be in the future when she was lost to him, and to consider only that by her own act she had reared a barrier between them that never could be crossed.

“When I found you had gone to-night from Mrs. Frankland’s—gone hurriedly and mysteriously—I knew at once where you had gone,” he said, leaning on the table and looking at her, his blue eyes as stern as a judge’s. “My suspicions and fears of months made me leap to but one conclusion—and I was right. I have nothing to say to—your lover. Yes, you may wince at that; it is an ugly word to hear from a husband’s lips, no matter how small an item he has become in your life. I have nothing to say to him. The other morning I settled my score with him. My rage is not against him—it is not he who has dealt me a blow which almost makes me wonder if there is any mercy in Heaven. It is you who have done this. I loved you—I believed in you. I find now you were not worth my devotion nor my faith.”

“No, no,” came in a strangled whisper from Vida’s lips, and she turned her head helplessly, looking from Clyde Hastings to her husband like one only half awake. “Clyde Hastings told me of things in your past which he said he could prove—”

The look that answered her was like a blow.

“And you came to him, did you? I knew he fancied he had much to tell you, and you trusted him, and came and listened and believed. Very well. And not so long ago, not even one year ago, you swore you would trust me no matter what happened. Oh, you have kept your word, have you not—you—you, my wife?”

Vida hurried to Clyde Hastings's side and desperately seized him by the arm.

"Tell him !" she cried. "Tell him what you have told me !"

"I won't hear him," came as a command from Sidney's lips. "I know his lies of old. I refuse to listen to them. I won't be judged by you on his accusations and in his presence. What he says is nothing to me. It seems to have a wonderful importance in your eyes. Stay—and enjoy it."

"Sidney !"

The cry went to his heart, but he steeled himself, yes, even when she flung herself before him and bathed his hands with her burning tears, he crushed back the pity that tried to gain supremacy. Mixed with these feelings was a mad disappointment, a sense of failure, a sense of being humiliated before his enemy which almost made him hate her.

"Sidney, I will believe you. Say that the story he has told me about this woman—Aloha—is not true—say she is not, has never been your wife—say that you have not been guilty of murder. Oh, my darling, one word—one word—and I will believe you. See, Sidney, I kneel to you—I do love you—"

"Pah ! I don't want your love—now. I swore to you once that my life was untouched by dishonor, and you believed it, or you said you did. Yet—you have come to this. You have stolen to this man's rooms—you knew he loved you, and, for aught I know, you may have encouraged him from the beginning. You chose to listen to him rather than have faith in me. I say I have done with you. Our paths lie wide apart from this night. What if disgrace comes now ? As well now as later."

There was a look of terrible despair on his face, a

light not unlike insanity in his eyes, as he tore his hands from Vida's feverish clasp and opened the door. She gained her feet, and was blindly reaching for her cloak to follow him, when she saw that Sidney's progress was stayed by the entrance of two men.

"Mr. Raritan, I believe?"

"Yes. What do you want with me?"

Oh, the light deep down in Clyde Hastings's eyes as he stood perfectly quiet, scarcely seeming to breathe.

"We heard you had left Mrs. Frankland's and come here."

"Well?" he asked, impatiently, thinking he was being delayed by some trifle.

"Mr. Raritan, you are my prisoner!"

Sidney stood like a rock, but a pale, greenish pallor surged over his face; he seemed incapable of movement.

Vida listened, clasping the chair before her for support, stupefaction, a black horror changing her face out of its natural loveliness.

"Your prisoner?" echoed Sidney, when he could command his voice. "You must be mad!"

"Sorry to say, sir, not at all. We are to bring you to Arizona. You are wanted for the murder of Allan Love. His body has been found, as well as proof against you. I advise you to say nothing, as it would be used against you in court. Kindly let me slip these bracelets on you, sir. The easiest way is the best."

There was a cry that rent even the hearts of the hard men who listened—a cry of agony inarticulate, indescribable, and Vida fell, face downwards, at her husband's feet,



CHAPTER XXVI.

THE JOURNEY HOME.

A clock striking four were the sounds that broke on Vida's ears when she regained her senses. They came to her as if from a far-away place. They were unreal, her surroundings were unreal, and she herself seemed to have merged her identity into another's.

For a moment everything was misty, and had it not been for those silvery strokes she would have fancied herself still dreaming.

In a blind, groping way she lifted her head and looked around. What had happened? This place was unfamiliar. How did she come there, or was she still the victim of some trick of her imagination? She had dreamed that Sidney had looked at her with an awful sorrow in his eyes, a dash of blood upon his pallid brow, his hand raised, as if to ward off her approach, as if to feel her touch would be unbearable.

She was still half-sitting on the couch, her dazed, blank eyes fastened on space, when the door was softly opened, and an old woman, a stranger, entered. Her coming completed the unreality of the position to Vida, for she had never seen her before.

"Ah, you are awake now!" said the old woman, in a soft, kind tone. "You are feeling better?"

"Who are you and where am I?" asked Vida, eagerly, "I—I—have forgotten—there is some memory,"—and she shuddered from head to foot—"but a vague one.

Tell me—tell me,” she moaned like a child, her great, dark eyes drawn with agony.

“Why, my dear child, you are in Mr. Hastings’s place. I am his housekeeper. Last night—”

But a smothered exclamation from Vida silenced her as she staggered to her feet.

“I remember! I remember! Heaven! And you let me lie like a dead creature while he—Sidney—Get me my cloak! Help me to leave here! Oh, help me to leave here! Help me! Not too late yet to see him! Oh, to see him!”

She moved about feverishly. She implored mutely. She was filled with the desire to annihilate distance, time, and reach Sidney’s side, to cling to him, to soothe him, to protest that no matter what he had done, no matter what happened, she still loved him and would to the end. Yet a weakness, a soul sickness, an uncertainty of movement and intention, rendered her helpless as a child, and at length she sank down moaning, seeing only the picture of Sidney’s departure with the detectives, his manacled hands, his stricken face.

“Oh, my love! my love! my love!” she whispered, as if he were there and she was speaking to him. “And I, by my mad jealousy, my want of faith, made you doubt me—added, perhaps, the keenest pang in your sufferings!”

The woman knelt beside her and chafed her hands, endeavoring to calm her; but Vida thrust her back fiercely.

“I must leave here! Give me my cloak! Where is it? Get me a cab! I must go, I tell you!”

“Had you not better wait with me until morning? It would be impossible for you to go home now—not yet dawn. Wait until the light comes, and I will go with you, poor child.”

"The light? Will the light ever come again? I must go, I tell you! You don't know—every moment is precious—every moment!"

As she spoke in low, ringing tones, she pushed aside the portière and found herself in a little library. Beside the dying fire Clyde Hastings sat, his head sunk upon his breast. Her cloak was lying on a chair near him, and as she lifted it he looked up.

"Where are you going?"

"Home. I suppose you can send some one for a cab," and she commanded her voice to quietness.

"Ah, you are going home? Not a pleasant journey, I should fancy. Do you quite realize what home is now, Vida?"

He stood up, his intense, searching eyes looking into hers.

"Yes, I know."

"Your husband—still call him so, if you like—your husband is not there. He is on his way in all probability to the West, to stand trial for his life on a charge of deliberate murder."

"Yes, I know," she said again, and clasping her hands she raised them to her brow. "Spare me. I know, I know."

"But perhaps you don't believe this of him? Perhaps you have determined to revive your stubborn woman's faith and cling to him, and trust him in defiance of proof?"

"I have not thought of that. I only feel that nothing matters except to reach him and comfort him, because I love him."

A sneer passed over Clyde's face, the light of mockery glittered in his eyes.

"And I thought you a proud woman," he said meditatively; "I thought you different from the mawkish

type of woman who boasts of a constancy that in reality is another name for stupidity. You love Sidney Raritan still—a bigamist—a murderer—a swindler! Yes, he is all of that! These are hard names, but he deserves them all. And you, a woman of heart, soul and brain, instead of crushing whatever sentiment still clings to you for him, instead of calling to your aid all the fierce pride of which you can be capable, you long only to comfort him—this man who had no scruple in deceiving you any more than in alluring an unsuspecting man to his death in some desolate canyon. *This* is the man you love; this is the man you have called husband!"

He came nearer to her, every word he uttered piercing her heart. Vida stood motionless, her fixed eyes seeming to dwell on the picture he described. Suddenly she raised her head, and a convulsion of suspicion, almost of dislike, crossed her beautiful face.

"Why do you tell me this? You are glad it is in your power to blot Sidney's name. This is your hour of triumph. A friend would pity me. You have no pity. I am going. Wrong or right, I am going to Sidney. Not your charges, not the charges of a hundred others will make me doubt him until I have seen his guilt proven myself," she said, her face transfigured. "Now, will you get me a cab? I must go at once." And she hurried to the door, her step and expression determined.

"You shall go—Vida—when you have first heard me;" now Clyde's tones were soft and half-regretful.

He had learned from former experiences that the masterful attitude was never successful with Vida. He might play on her sympathies, and so touch her heart; he could never subdue her spirit and conquer her otherwise.

"Listen to me," he said appealingly. "In a few months Sidney, without a doubt, will be declared a felon. Set aside the fact that another woman lives who rightfully should bear his name before the world—leave that until, as you say, it is fully proved—the declaration of his guilt will make you a free woman. Vida," and his tone grew more urgent, more passionate, "you will need a friend then—you will be free. I love you, I have loved you for years. While I live I must love you, no matter what comes. You must admit that, during the past months, I have controlled myself. Have I said one disloyal word, even though I knew the treasure of your love was given to a man utterly unworthy? I gave no hint of my knowledge of Aloha's relationship to him, because I saw you loved him, and to pain you would have been more bitter than paining myself. I could not. Not until I knew the secret could be kept secret no longer did I hint at his treachery to you. You have learned to like me a little. May I dare hope that when you are free you will remember these words of mine which I speak now: I love you so that the thought of you is woven into every second of my life! The dear reverence of you is my religion. In a year—in five—in twenty—should we both live, it will be the same. Remember this when you are free. Come!"

The reality of his love was in his keen face as he lifted her cold hands and pressed a kiss of submissive reverence upon them.

There were blinding tears in Vida's eyes as she went down the stairs by his side. What if all he had said should be too true? His words of love had touched her by their apparent simplicity and earnestness; but the pain in her heart was for Sidney, all unworthy though he might be. Shadowy thoughts of dark,

weary days of imprisonment for him, or the horror of a judicial death ! She alone, heart-stricken, hopeless !

Clyde Hastings's love had followed her like a fatality. Would she be driven some day to accept it as a shelter, when tired of warring against the world ? Oh, would she ?

When they reached the street they found a misty dawn creeping ghostlike over the sleeping city, and at the door what seemed a phantom cab stood waiting.

Clyde assisted her in, and held her hand in a close, earnest clasp.

"Perhaps I had better not go with you. You are not afraid ?"

"Oh, no, no, no !"

"Then good-by. You will not fail to call upon me if at any time I can render you any service. I will be ready. My heart bleeds for you. It has been like death to cause you pain. God bless you ! Good-by !"

"Good-by !" came in a hopeless whisper from Vida's lips.

The driver touched his horses, and she was carried through the creeping, dreamlike mist on a journey that seemed a horrible dream.

Alone in the awful gray light that chills even a happy soul, Vida gave vent to her despair. What havoc had been made in her life within a few hours ! Was an overthrow ever more complete ? That moment when she had stood beside the portière looking down at the brilliant crowd in Mrs. Frankland's hall and the maid approached her with a note—was it a hundred years ago, the memory of a past existence ? Ah, she had tasted of the waters of Marah since then ; tasted deeply, and the brackish flavor was in her very soul.

Sidney false to her ? Sidney the husband of another woman ? Sidney a murderer under arrest ? Oh, it

was too awful to be true. Too awful. But worst of all, he had gone to face this terrible charge believing her as guilty as Clyde Hastings had declared he was.

"Not that, not that," came from her drawn, pale lips. "Let him be proven guilty of all—let the worst come—but he shall know that I, at least, was true, all undeserving though he may have been."

When, after a drive that seemed never-ending, the cab turned into the grounds around Applethorpe, she pressed her pale face to the glass and peered out, hungry for a sight of Sidney, hoping he was there and that she could meet him, plead her cause, and assure him of her devotion in spite of all.

A spectral sun was sending its lances through the fog, as she went up the steps to the house.

The door stood open. She passed a frightened servant, who looked after her as if she were a spirit, and then Bebé stepped from the library, the signs of tears upon her face.





CHAPTER XXVII.

A NEWSPAPER ACCOUNT.

"You have come—you have come!" and Bebé flung herself into Vida's arms, her pretty face quivering with grief. "Oh, where have you been? Why did you stay away so long? What does it all mean? Sidney was here—"

"Was here?" and Vida became suddenly rigid and cold, a chill in her tone. "Was here? Then he has gone?"

"Yes, he has gone. Oh, come in here, Vida dear; there is a fire! You are so cold."

She led the way to the dining-room. In the grate a fire was slowly dying and on the mantel stood some lighted candles. Vida caught sight of her face in a mirror, and of Bebé clinging to her. How strange they looked, both still in their ball gowns, the early sunlight stealing wistfully through the windows, the neglected candles flaring on the mantel. Over the whole house there was an aroma of calamity, a mysterious sense of something forever departed, as if death had suddenly crossed the threshold.

Bebé placed Vida in a chair, while her tear-stained eyes, filled with anxious wonder, were fixed upon the pure, pale face, which seemed a mask for some terrible secret.

"Sidney has gone?" came in a monotonous whisper

from Vida's lips. "Gone—without a word—without a word! And such a journey! Oh, pitying God, such a journey! Help him—help him!" she moaned.

Bebé sank on her knees and forced Vida to look at her.

"You must tell me, dear," she said, coaxingly. "I ought to know. Something terrible has happened. What, oh, what? Who were these men who came with Sidney? Why did they stay beside him all the while he wrote the letters which he dispatched Ruggles with? I saw them. One was to his lawyers, the other to his partner. And here are two more—one for you and one for Aunt Madge in Washington."

Vida took the letter and opened it eagerly. It took but a moment to read it. She crushed it in her hand and closed her eyes in pain.

"I feel so cold, so sad, so strange. Oh, darling, what does it mean? Why did he look so sad? Why were there tears in his eyes when he kissed me? What did he mean when he said: 'Will I ever see you again, little Bebé? Ever again?' Vida, where have they taken him?"

She wound her soft, rounded arms around Vida's neck, and laid her cheek against her shoulder. The attitude was one of protection and appeal.

"You will know very soon, Bebé. Ah, very soon." Vida roused herself, seized the girl by the shoulders, and brought her burning eyes close to the innocent, wondering ones which met hers. "But remember, you must not believe what they say. It's not true. No, it is not true."

Tenderly and shudderingly she looked at the written lines again. They were without beginning and without signature:

"You may never return to Applethorpe, I do not know, But

if you do, dispose of it as you see fit. Bebé I am sending to Washington. We will never meet again. Better so. Do not be impatient. Perhaps the law will find me guilty and give you your freedom very soon. If not—if I should be declared innocent of this crime—a divorce can, nevertheless, be easily obtained in a Western court."

This was all. And how it rankled! It told her the past was past forever. No estrangement could be more complete. No reproach, no regrets. He thought it too late for that. No declaration of his innocence. It was as if he were addressing a mere acquaintance—one taking a passing interest in his life. Sending Bebé away, too! Did that not suggest his opinion of her unworthiness and unfitness to take care of her?

How bitter it was! How bitter! There seemed no future for her. Everything was swallowed up in pain for the present.

An hour later, Vida lay on the couch in her room, wrapped in a loose robe. She was trying to think of what there was to be done, and what way her course should lie. She determined to follow Sidney, to hover around him, even though he guessed it not, to know the details of his life, to watch, to hope.

Why could she not hate him, after all that Clyde Hastings had said? Did she believe the story of Aloha true? Perhaps. The story of the murder? No. Yet, despite the first awful uncertainty in her mind, his wretchedness in his present position made her pity him and yearn for him. Ah, it was a sad luxury to be able to pity him, while there was still one doubt of his untruth to her!

Her maid had brought breakfast, and had carried it back untouched; but she had hardly left the room when the door was opened with a rush and Bebé flew to her side. A newspaper was clutched in her hand;

her blue eyes were widened in an expression of fear; the young face had aged strangely. She came to Vida's side.

"You did not tell me," she said brokenly, "because you knew it would break my heart! Oh, do you know what they are saying of Sidney here? Do you know? They say he murdered Allan Love, Felix's father. Think of it! Think of it! And Felix must believe it. Ah, that's why he went away without a word! What could he say? What would be the use of words? His father's body found, and Sidney accused of killing him! This is what he meant, months ago, when he spoke of disgrace parting us. It has come! It has come! Felix hoped it was not true, and became Sidney's friend. But he heard of this—this awful body found!—and he went away. How horribly clear all is now! Oh, Sidney—dear, dear Sid!—what brutes to think you could have done this!"

She flung the paper passionately before Vida. No need to look very far nor very long. The head-lines flamed before her eyes:

"AN OLD MURDER DISCOVERED.

"For more than a year the unexplained absence of Allan Love, the well-known mine owner, resident of Honolulu and San Francisco, has puzzled all who knew him. Many conjectures were rife as to his disappearance, and for the first few months but little was thought seriously of it, as he was eccentric in his habits of life, rich and a persistent traveller. However, as all advertisements and inquiries availed nothing, and he seemed to have absolutely disappeared from the face of the earth, one rumor grew and spread: This was the event of a snowy night last winter, the last time that human eyes rested upon Allan Love. At that time he was seen in San Francisco with Sidney Raritan, the purchaser of the great Latour mine, which proved a bonanza. It was strange to see the two men together, as their enmity since Allan sold the mine to Raritan had

been well known. He had disposed of it at a small sum as almost worthless. Raritan was more patient, and found it a veritable gold mine. They were known to be rivals in business, though formerly fast friends, and it was rumored that they were rivals in love for the hand of Aloha Brysdale, one of the prettiest English girls in Honolulu. When, therefore, they were seen together by mutual friends in San Francisco the incident was commented upon. It has never been explained. That night the two set out on a journey across the plains. It was one of the wildest nights of the winter; still they went on—but where and for what reason has remained a mystery. Allan Love was never seen again. Sidney Raritan went East, where, by reason of his wealth and social position, he became one of the representative young men of New York. He married a very beautiful woman, formerly the wife of Ripley Hetherford. Life went very well with him.

“An astounding piece of news has just come from the West, however, and Sidney Raritan is to-day an accused murderer. The body of Allan Love has been found in a remote, sheltered pool near Draxton, Arizona. It is, of course, almost unrecognizable, but marks upon the clothing prove its identity. The interest in this remarkable case is, however, centered around a small, red, rain-soaked and sodden memorandum-book discovered in the mud of the bank. To think that a man's fate hangs upon such a trifle, and that a memorandum-book may be the means of putting the gallows's rope on Sidney Raritan's neck! The book was his, the last entry in it being made on the day before he left San Francisco with Love, the words being: ‘Meet Love at four.’

“Last night the officers sent by the coroner arrived in New York from Arizona. Raritan was at the splendid ball given by Mrs. Frankland to several distinguished foreigners, and the detectives, anxious to secure him, as they had learned of his intention to leave America on the following day, went to the Fifth Avenue mansion on their ghastly errand. He was not there, however, having left just before the close of the ball, and he was traced to the rooms of his friend, Mr. Clyde Hastings, at the Lombard apartments.

“To-day he leaves for the West to stand trial for his life. The

circumstantial proof against him is at present significant, and in all probability will be strengthened. His hurried preparations to leave the country seem very suspicious, and Mr. Sidney Raritan will have a good deal to explain."

Vida read this to the last word, and the blank anguish in her face stabbed Bebé's heart. She stooped and kissed her.

"Poor dear," she said in her caressing way, "how hard this is for you ! You will go to Sidney, of course. He will want you ! He will need you."

An ache rose in Vida's throat.

"I will go to him—yes, I will !" she said, and set her little teeth, and thought drearily of Sidney's altered love.

"You did not tell me where you went last night from Mrs. Frankland's. Sidney seemed anxious—and then his returning without you ! Oh, I was full of such awful fears. Had it anything to do with this ?" and her shuddering eyes rested on the paper where she had read the destruction of her own love dream as well as the menace to her brother's life.

But Vida was spared the necessity of answering by an interruption. The maid entered.

"If you please, ma'am, Mr. Raritan's valet says he supposes he's not needed here any more, and, as his wages are paid up, he is going."





CHAPTER XXVIII.

FELIX AWAKENS TO THE TRUTH.

Snow covered all the land, a snow of late November. It was a marvel of beauty and unbroken whiteness from which the sunlight struck diamond-like gleams; the trees were feathery with frost tracery; the air had that bracing freshness which comes only from winter's coldness mixed with a blue sky and a vividly bright sun.

In the deep casement of one of the upper windows of Applethorpe Bebé sat alone, gazing at the far-away glimpse of the Hudson, heaving sullenly under its pall of floating ice. She was quite alone in the big, empty room, her hands strenuously clasping her knees, her fixed eyes dark with the subtle expression of fear which never left them now, gazing into space.

She thought of Vida chained to Applethorpe by a fever which drained her strength—a prisoner there while she fretted against her captivity, her soul filled with a sick longing to see Sidney, to hear his voice say he forgave and believed in her, to be the sharer of his grief, to shed, if possible, one ray of light into the blackness which had so suddenly and terribly enveloped him.

She thought of Felix Love. Where was he? Where had he fled? The case was dark against Sidney in the far

West. Trifles, in themselves of no importance, yet frightfully portentous when considered with the circumstances of the crime, had made a chain to bind him, in which there was but one link missing—the presence of Felix Love, the dead man's son, as a most important witness. He had seen the accused man and his supposed victim on their way to the train the night Allan Love disappeared mysteriously; he had spoken to him. It was hoped by the prosecuting lawyers that he might throw much light on the case, particularly as he had known Sidney in New York during the fall.

But no one knew where Felix was. His chambers were found in perfect order; no signs were there to tell of a sudden journey. His servant had not seen him for a fortnight since he had started for a ride, and his horse was missing from the stable where he kept it. If he had wished to emulate his father's story for the past year of mystery, he could not have accomplished his purpose more successfully.

"It is all strange; it is all horrible!" came in a whisper from Bebé's lips, as she climbed wearily from her seat and went back to her watch by Vida's bedside.

The nurse was there, but only in Bebé's presence did the unhappy woman find a sense of comfort. The golden head was raised from the pillow as she entered, and the hands were stretched out pleadingly.

"What news, dear? Have you heard anything more?"

"Cousin Tom has hardly had time to get out West, you know, dear, and Sid's lawyers sent such a full account by this morning's mail. We must wait, dear. We must be patient, Vida, darling."

Vida lay back and closed her eyes, then opened them, shuddering.

"Oh, my thoughts—my thoughts! If only my brain could cease its work for a little while," she moaned.

"You must take a soothing draught; then perhaps you'll sleep," said the nurse, holding the glass to her lips.

"Oh, no; that stupefies me. I don't want to be plunged into unconsciousness. I want to know when word comes—the word of death or life. Bebé, do you think there will be a telegram to-night?"

"Perhaps! But you see they are waiting for Felix Love. When they have quite given him up, perhaps the case will be determined without him. Oh, Vida, I'm glad he ran away. He wouldn't do anything to hurt Sidney; he'd die first;" and her eyes were dewy with tears, as, kneeling beside the bed, she caressed Vida's pale, cold hands.

"They must free him," came in a harsh breath from Vida's tense lips. "Oh, God wouldn't let them kill him, my brave fellow, on such evidence! They are hungry for his life out in that wild, bleak place, Bebé. They would like to see him die. Why, they think nothing of shedding blood in those outlaw regions and the witnesses were perjured. What does it matter to them—a human life, even though innocent? One human life—but, ah, that life makes my world!"

Only the ticking of the clock was heard in the quiet room for awhile, a sigh, a broken word, a faltering prayer.

Meanwhile, the house by the river held two secrets instead of one. Since the night he was flung from his horse, Felix had lain on a bed of pain. He had been unconscious, and attended by a discreet physician who had seen only old Remus, and who asked no questions as long as his fee was bestowed with the required regularity.

Now Felix was better, the physician had been dispensed with, but the garret room where he lay, weak and mystified, remained locked. Usually his food had been placed in the room while he slept, but twice he had seen Theodore Griggs carry in the tray, and, of course, he did not dream he was looking upon Mr. Raritan's French valet, whom he had once seen.

"Look here," he had said in his impulsive way. "Where the deuce am I? Is this a sort of hospital? I know I was flung from Prince's back; my riding togs have recalled that to my mind. I've been here a day or two, I suppose?" and he swept his hand over his thick hair.

"For the present you'd better not talk; you'll get perfectly well all the sooner. You're in good hands. Just rest, be quiet. You'll find some good books over there—Dumas, Hugo, Rider Haggard—all exciting. Amuse yourself and don't worry. Those are the doctor's orders."

With these words Mr. Griggs turned on his heel and decamped.

Felix could say "By Jove!" as often as he liked, frown, stamp, and tug at his embryo mustache until it was almost effaced—it did no good. He was left alone in that maddeningly quiet room, and whether he were two miles or two hundred from New York he had not the faintest idea. In vain he looked from the window trying to recall some point in the landscape. Both the lonely river beside which he had ridden and the gables of Applethorpe could only be seen from the front of the house, and this room was in the back.

On this winter day Felix was almost mad with impatience. True, he had written letters to Bébé and his servant, which Theodore Griggs had very obligingly taken to post, but no answer had reached him from

either, and he began to demand angrily why he, now perfectly recovered, should still be kept there, the doors locked. He must have his freedom. This mystery, whatever it meant, had lasted long enough. True, he was still weak, but he would choose another place to recover in, rather than that small, lonely room.

He was standing in the middle of the floor, his hands in his pockets, a novel flung face downward at his feet, when the door was unlocked and Theodore Griggs came in. His smile was positively sweet, his manner affable.

"How are you to-day?" he asked, as he placed the tray of food on the table.

Felix was looking past him at the door.

"Will you tell me," he said, abruptly, "why some one always locks that door on the outside as soon as you come in?"

"You are mistaken, my dear boy. The lock is automatic."

"Who are the people in this house, that they seem determined I shall not leave the place? I insist on knowing!" he said imperiously. "I've been patient long enough, but I won't stand this inexplicable business much longer! No, by Heaven!"

Mr. Griggs shook his head sadly, as if pained at the sight of such ingratitude.

"These people saved your life, my dear boy."

"I know that—I'm willing to be as grateful as any one could wish—I'm willing to pay them back every cent, and more than they spent on me—but I won't be locked in. Look here! What does it mean, anyway? How far am I from New York?"

"Tut—tut! Not so fast. That's neither here nor there. If your friends think it best to prevent your impetuous escape until you are quite better—why, hu-

mor them. Now, then, I've a piece of news for you ;" and as he spoke he slowly unfolded a newspaper.

A shadowy premonition swept over Felix ; all his bravado left him ; he felt that the newspaper in the strange man's hand would mean something vital to him, for good or ill.

"You told me your name was Felix Love?"

"Yes."

"Well, they are searching for you."

"My friends? No wonder. And you have kept me here—you and your confederates—probably to get money from me as the price of liberty ;" and the hot blood leaped to Felix's face. "At last I begin to see my suspicions were correct."

"My young friend, you were never farther from the actual truth of the case. You are wanted not by your fashionable friends in New York—not only by them, at least—not by your pretty sweetheart alone either—but by the officers of the law, to have your testimony as to what you know of the relations which existed between your father and Sidney Raritan, when you saw them last together, what was said, and all the rest. Ah, now you pale—now you start back ! I have surprised you, have I?" And Theodore Griggs winked his eye.

"Go on !" said Felix, fiercely. "Why am I wanted? What's—what's happened?" And he thought of those menacing fears that not so long ago had threatened to separate him eternally from Bebé.

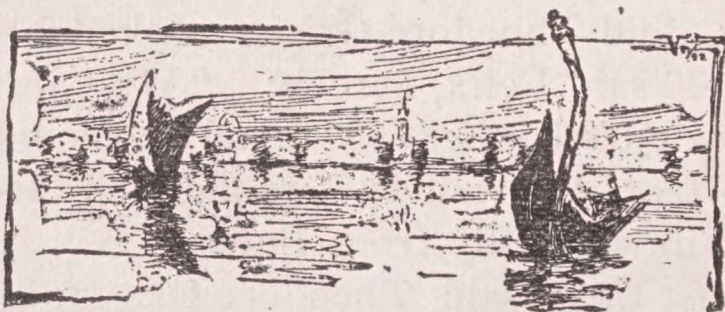
"It's just this," said Theodore Griggs, hugging his leg: "The body of Allan Love was found in a pool near Draxton, Arizona. He had been murdered."

"Good heavens !" And Felix stood absolutely still, his eyes fastened stonily on the detective's face.

"Yes, indeed. He was murdered, poor man—murdered beyond a doubt. If you read this you will see

what proof is closing around Sidney Raritan, and you will see that the prosecuting attorneys are fiercely anxious for your presence there. You can forge the last link for the chain. Why do you look so ghastly? Don't you like the job? But think—think! Your father has been killed in a cruel way by the brother of the girl you would have married. A good thing you discovered this in time. Of course it is. Now eat and rest, for to-morrow you 'll be given your liberty to go to Arizona and do your little part toward helping Sidney Raritan up the gallows steps."

Felix had taken the paper, and his eyes were devouring the details of the case. In his intense attention he did not notice that Griggs had lightly tapped on the door. It was opened, and he silently withdrew. When Felix looked up, a score of burning questions on his lips, he found himself alone.





CHAPTER XXIX.

A REVELATION.

Reaching the floor below, Theodore Griggs found his employer pacing the room in a state of nervous excitement and exhilaration.

"Come in, Griggs, come in!" and he pointed with his draped arm to a telegram on the table. "Read it!"

It was twilight by this time, and in the red light at the window Griggs opened the yellow square of paper.

Was it only the crimson from the west that made the words seem written in a haze of blood—those direful words sent from the West by the paid watcher of Mr. Fairleigh!

"Raritan found guilty of murder in the first degree."

"H'm!" and Theodore Griggs tapped the paper with his spectacles. "So that means the worst for him—the very worst! Poor devil! Well, Fairleigh, you ought to be satisfied now. Whatever grudge you have against this man, it's going to be glutted with a vengeance."

There was silence in the room, and then, from beneath the folds, came slow, earnest words tinged by an eager longing that made the flesh creep on Griggs's bones:

"And I can't be there to see it!"

"Whew ! You're a nice, bloodthirsty gentleman, you are, upon my word ! By the way, wouldn't it be terrible if this ghastly business was all a mistake—if the body found was somebody else, and Allan Love wasn't dead at all—eh, now ?"

"Don't be a fool ! How could there be a mistake ? Why hasn't Love answered any of the many inquiries sent broadcast for him ? Why has no one seen him ? Bah ! The man is dead. Ah, how well I remember him ! How often he has told me of the feud between Raritan and himself ! He knew something of happiness until that man crossed his path. After that all went wrong with him ; he lost a good part of his wealth—he was unlucky ; doom followed him of every sort. I knew him well ; I know what he suffered. I have reasons of my own for hating Raritan, but I would be glad to see him done for, as a sort of memorial to ill-starred Allan Love, if for no other reason."

"Well, well ! It may be as you say," and Griggs looked meditative. "Still, I can't help feeling a bit sorry for Sidney Raritan. He seemed a fine fellow, not the sort who usually stand in a prisoner's dock. It has always seemed to me that he could, if he liked, give an explanation of the night he started off in the snow with Allan Love. Of course, I may be wrong, but at times it has seemed to me that he might, for quixotic reasons, be shielding some woman. He's just that sort of fellow."

"Your fancies are absurd. Let's say no more about them, if you please. I want to ask you a few questions. Will you kindly be seated ? Felix Love has read of his father's murder, the finding of the body and all the rest ? How did he act ?"

"Well, it stunned him. I never saw a healthy face grow so white," said Griggs, in a tone of thoughtful

sadness. "It means a good deal to him, you know. Besides the horror of his father's fate, this makes him renounce the girl he loves—Bebé Raritan. By the way, you can let him go to-morrow. He's almost mad with impatience, and there's no danger of his returning to his sweetheart now."

"To-morrow? Yes, I'll give him a day to get over the shock. Had Raritan not been convicted as yet, I'd have had you hustle him off as a witness as soon as he was able to sit up; but he's not needed now," said Mr. Fairleigh, in a tone of deep content.

"I'll be back again," said Theodore Griggs shortly, and left the place.

Once outside the house a change passed over his face; he clenched his hands and frowned.

"Diabolical!" he said, fiercely. "Di-a-bol-ical!"

Darkness had swept down, and Applethorpe lay in a shadow as he paused at the turn of the road commanding a view of it. A light burned in an upper window. He knew it was the room where Vida lay prostrated, half mad with grief.

"Do they know yet, I wonder?" he asked himself. "I venture to say that this night will be the blackest in the life of the two women watching there. H'm! What a world of care and cross-purposes it is! The good people are right when they call it a vale of tears."

The scene in that sick chamber might have wrung a Spartan heart. There are many sorts of grief, and there may be a controversy as to which is the more awful—disgrace or death; but when both are mixed in the cup of fate the dregs of anguish are tasted. This was the draught which Vida in her wretchedness and remorse quaffed that never-to-be-forgotten night, as, despite the warnings of her nurse, she paced the

room, but one refrain coming in a chilling whisper from her white lips :

“ Sidney is to die ! ”

In the house by the river, every room, save the one which held Felix a prisoner, was quiet. He had determined to leave it, and leave it that night.

What sort of place was this which held him ? What sort of people had constituted themselves his jailers ? There was no malice in their attitude, for the food given him was plenteous, good and daintily served. Yet they must have an object, and a strong one, for detaining him there.

Fully dressed, he sat on the side of his bed and tried to unravel the mystery.

“ It must be that these people are friends of Raritan, determined to prevent my appearing at the trial ! That’s it,” he thought. “ I’d rather not believe it of him, but I can’t see any other explanation. I must leave here to-night, get to my rooms and prepare to go West. My duty is now to my father. All doubts are at rest. He was murdered ; and if by Sidney Raritan, he must suffer for it.”

Before him the sweet, arch face of Bebé rose temptingly and appealingly, but he sternly hardened his heart against the lovely vision. All that was over. He would suffer even more than he was suffering now ; yes—yes ; but still he must think only of Bebé Raritan as if she were dead.

There was a determined, bitter expression on his young face as he stood up, the first clang of the bell sounding on the quiet night.

“ This is my chance. I’ll have finished by the time the last stroke has been given,” he muttered ; and from its hiding-place he took a knife he had secreted earlier in the day after his dinner had been brought him.

Dexterously, rapidly and as silently as possible, he began to use this in prying open the lock of the door. The knife was clumsy, but fortunately the door was old and the lock loose in its fastenings. Before the clock had struck seven he heard the rasping sound that told him he was free. The door stood open.

Without delaying a moment, he put on his hat and stepped into the dark hallway. Not a sound broke the stillness. He felt encouraged, and descended the stairs with swift, light steps. Every sense was on the alert for a sound, a movement, but none came, and he reached the ground floor unmolested. To his amazement the front door stood wide open. So much the better; and in a few moments he found himself in the narrow strip of garden.

Overhead, in a sky heaped with masses of dark clouds, the moon sailed lonesomely, now plunging behind a vaporous bank, now peering out as if from a casement. This fitful light made the scene around him peculiarly strange and ghostly. He looked up at the shuttered house, the garden under its pall of snow, and then at the river just beyond the path, giving out steely gleams whenever the moonlight touched it.

"Why, I know this house!" thought Felix. "I remember passing it every time I rode to Applethorpe. To think I have been lying here, for how long Heaven only knows, so close to--Bebé. I remember that a strange, monkish-looking individual frightened Prince that night, and sent him on the mad gallop which flung me off when he struck the stile--"

His meditations ceased, a thrill of horror went through him, and he moved back, sheltered by the angle of the house, for out through the open door came the figure he had been speculating about, a moving mystery--something about him so suggestive of

silence and pain, his heart contracted in gazing upon it.

The figure passed into the snowy road, and under the snow-laden trees moved slowly beside the river. Quivering with curiosity about this strange creature who had been his jailer for so long, Felix hurried after him, though keeping a considerable distance behind.

It was an exciting adventure, and the mystery made Felix's heart glow for the moment as if he had drunk deeply of wine. A strange feeling assailed him—a desire to discover the identity of this strange being at all hazards—to tear away the protecting cloth and look upon his face. Who was he? Why did he garb himself in this mysterious way? But stranger, more inexplicable still, why had he cared for him while making a prisoner of him?

These thoughts had hardly sped through his mind before a strange thing occurred. He saw the draped form stagger against a tree for support; he saw him clutch wildly at the folds of cloth above his heart, a hoarse moan echoed on the night air, and he fell, his dark robes outspread like a huge blot upon the snow.

In a moment Felix was beside him. He knelt down, pushed back the thick, sheltering hood that the night breeze might revive him, and loosened the close bands around the throat. The moon was behind one of the huge banks of cloud, and the features were hidden from him in the shadow, but when the great globe of pearl came swimming into the clear sky, he bent his head eagerly, his breath delayed upon his parted lips. The inmate of the house by the river was unconscious; he could not see the young face so close, so intent above him; he could not answer the look growing in those keen, young eyes—the look of unbelief, of frenzied amazement, of shivering horror.

“Heavens !” He started to his feet, icy sweat upon his brow, a feeling like death at his heart, appalled at the revelation which the moon had disclosed.

At his feet lay—his father ! Yes, he knew that face despite the hideous changes branded upon it ; he knew in that one glance why he had hidden himself from the world. Everything that had puzzled him was swept away as a mist is driven back by lances of the sun. His father—alive—and Sidney Raritan perhaps now condemned to death for a murder he had never committed !

How long Felix stood gazing down on that ghastly face he could not tell. But steps and a voice aroused him. Some one was calling :

“Mas’r Fairleigh ! Mas’r—mas’r ?” and the tones were trembling, fearsome, and full of anxiety.

Determined to see the matter to the end, Felix stepped behind a tree as an old, bent figure hurried forward through the moonlight, now as bright as day.

It was old Remus, and Felix knew him at a glance. If he had been inclined to doubt his senses before, to think himself the prey of a moonlight hallucination or a feverish fancy, Remus’s appearance would have dispelled them.

The old man bent over his master’s form, evidently aghast at finding the face uncovered. A cry of fear broke from him, and lifting his head he peered cautiously around.

Felix could not wait another second. He bounded out and seized Remus by the shoulders.

“You know me, don’t you, Remus ? Oh, yes, I understand all now,” came in quick, breathless sentences from his lips. “You have had me in the same house with you for weeks past. I have escaped. There lies—my father.”

Old Remus continued to gaze at him as if he had been a specter risen before him, his eyes distended under the shaggy, gray brows, his shaking hands lifted before him, as if to ward off the approach of something fearful.

At length he gained his voice, and the instinct was strong in him to protect his master at any cost.

"I know you, honey. Yas, in course. I'm old Remus. I ben with Mr. Fairleigh some time as servant. He's a sick gen'leman, Mas'r Felix. That's him, right thar—that's him. Youah father is daid—didn't you know?—foun' daid, and Mr. Raritan killed him—shuah."

Felix shook the old, quivering form from him, and the moonlight made his stern, young face terrible in its pallor.

"Don't lie to me! The game is up, I tell you. See here," and he took the old man by the arm while he pointed down to the uncovered face, over which the moonlight had shed a strange, greenish radiance; "I know that man is my father. I know the secret which has made him hide from the world. Yes, you may well shudder. I didn't live in Honolulu for nothing. My father is alive. Ah, better for himself if he were dead, for he is a leper as white as snow?"





CHAPTER XXX.

A BITTER DILEMMA.

Tears glistened in Felix's eyes as he spoke those last terrible words, and Remus, with a cry of hopeless defeat and anguish, fell to his knees and buried his head upon the silent breast of his master.

A leper ! A victim of the white curse which sent men and women into an isolation so terrible that death had seemed ecstasy beside it ! This fate was his father's, and Felix felt his heart shaken to its core.

He roused Remus, and together they bore the silent form down the snowy, moonlit road to the quiet house which had been a secret shelter for so many months. Question after question beat in Felix's brain ; picture after picture rose before him. His father had disappeared, had never dared return to settle up his affairs in Honolulu, as life in the leper colony would have been his. He understood that, and he thought he understood Sidney Raritan's terrible position. Suspicion had pointed to him, and chance circumstantial evidence had done the rest. Oh, thank Heaven, the charge against him was not true ! He would be saved from death now !

It was dawn before Felix heard a voice answer old Remus in the adjoining room, and, standing at the door, he listened.

" Why do you look at me that way, Remus ? I know

I have been ill again—fell down, didn't I? Ah, this treacherous heart of mine! How often will it play me false before the end really comes?"

"Mas'r—oh, mas'r—I don't know how to tell you—" and Remus's voice broke in a sob.

"What is it? Speak—speak!" And Felix, through the half-opened door, saw his father start up and seize Remus's arm. "No one—saw me—not that—"

"Yas, sah; jest so. I went after you when I missed you, and—and—I don' know how he got out of the room, but—"

"Felix!" rang out in a wild cry of dismay and terror. "He has looked on this face of mine, has he? He knows all—knows I am alive? Oh, Heaven! Oh, Heaven!"

Every pulse was quivering; his heart was on fire as Felix listened, and, obeying an impulse, he stepped suddenly into the room. The drooping cowl was lifted a little, and there was a baleful radiance in the hidden eyes that, from the shadow, gazed out at him.

"Father, haven't you one word of love for me? Oh, think—think what finding you means to me, who but a few hours ago thought of you as dead—as murdered! You have a word of love for me, dad, haven't you?" and he approached impulsively, with outstretched hands.

Allan Love retreated.

"Stay there! Don't touch me! I cannot bear it!" and he sank down beside the table, murmuring despairingly: "Is all lost—lost?"

Felix, in his impetuous way, leaned across the table toward him, his frank eyes aglow.

"You hid from me, father. Why did you do it? Surely when this curse fell upon you, you should have come to me. No one would have been more faithful,

no one would have guarded your secret so tenderly. Why, dad, I'd have died for you! Don't you know that?"

"Would you?" asked Allan Love, suddenly. "Well, I shall not require such a sacrifice as that. Will you be silent? Will you keep my secret, now that you know it? Will you let *another man*—die for me?"

A ghastly grayness overspread Felix's face, and in the raw half-light he looked spectral.

"You don't mean"—but the words faltered—"you can't mean that you will permit the law to take Sidney Raritan's life for a crime he is innocent of? You don't mean that?"

"Yes, I do."

For a moment Felix seemed stricken dumb, a horror deepening in his eyes.

"I wish I had not lived to hear you say those words," he said in a slow, earnest tone. "What you ask is impossible. Sidney Raritan must be freed from the charge of murder, and without delay."

"And what of me?" asked Allan Love. "That happens—and what becomes of me? Think of this, Felix Love, and remember you are my son."

"Can you not write and say you are living, so that the law will give Raritan his liberty, then you go away secretly? No one need ever know your secret. I will go with you, dad. I will dedicate my life to you while you live. Only save Sidney Raritan! Save him!"

Allan Love arose, and a low exclamation of impatience broke from him.

"Listen to me, if you please, and let there be an end to this mawkish nonsense. I have always been a tender father with you. You remember my love, my care! That was before I became the thing that I am—before a poison entered my soul and turned every bit of sweet-

ness in my nature to something more bitter than wormwood. Now I am stern, invincible to pity. Why should I show mercy—I to whom no mercy has been shown by God or man? Sidney Raritan is the one man in all the world I hate. When I heard you were going to marry his sister, I felt that, compared with such an event, I would rather you died suddenly in the heyday of your life—your young, splendid strength. I meant to keep you from it somehow, and that night, when you were thrown from your horse at my very door, it seemed the work of a kind fate. I kept you here. I would have kept you forever rather than have had you return to that girl. But the news of her brother's arrest I saw made a complete barrier between you, and I had intended to let you go your way on the morrow."

He paused in the excited stream of his talk, while Felix, fascinated, rigid, dumb, waited for the next words.

"Circumstantial evidence has marked Sidney Raritan as my murderer. This is false, you say? Not as false as you may think. I am worse than dead, and he was the evil genius of my life. If he is liberated, it must be because Allan Love is living; and Allan Love, to be proved living, must be seen, identified beyond all doubt. Now do you understand? You must choose on which side you will stand—whether you will free Sidney Raritan and send me to a life on some isolated island—Molokai or elsewhere—or let him die in my stead. Think over it, my son."

With these words, he pushed aside the portière and left Felix alone in the room, a look like death in his young face.

A stealthy footstep awoke him from the reverie into which he had fallen, and, looking up, he saw

Theodore Griggs standing regarding him with a half-quizzical expression.

He placed his fingers to his lips to insure silence.

"Poor boy, I heard all. It's rather a difficult situation for you, isn't it? For all he said is true," he whispered.

There was a shrewd twinkle in the gray eyes as he shook his head solemnly, and taking Felix by the arm, led him to a secluded room, closing the door carefully.

Felix looked up at him in mute appeal.

"Heaven, how awful! What am I to do? Is there no way out of this? Must one or the other suffer?" he asked, a hoarse, strenuous note in his voice.

"Without a doubt. If you release Sidney Raritan you send your father to a death in life. Think of the horror of any leper settlement! Here they would send him to share the exile of a few Chinamen whose condition beggars description, or they might send him back to Molokai, since it appears he contracted the disease in Honolulu. It's a very hard position for you, and the worst of it is, there's no way out of it."

"What must I do?" asked Felix. "What would you do? Show me where I stand—do, in pity's name—for the events of this night have crushed all but the sense of suffering out of me. It is not right, it cannot be right, to let an innocent man die, even to save a father. I don't believe it!" he burst out in anguish. "I can't do it." And he thought of Sidney's frank eyes, his young life so full of happiness and success; of Vida, who loved Sidney; and of Bebé, whom he loved.

Theodore Griggs pursed up his mouth.

"Well, can you save him, and sacrifice your father? There's the question."

"I shall go and swear that I have seen my father

alive, but that he has been terribly disfigured and cannot be seen ; that he has gone away to the other end of the world."

"Useless, my dear boy, quite useless."

"I'll bring a letter from him ; he'll surely give it to me ; one that will prove him alive beyond all doubt—his own handwriting."

"A mere leaf on the wings of the storm. The prosecuting officers will pooh-pooh it, and say it is a dodge put up by Raritan's family in the hope of saving him. You would have your trouble for nothing, I assure you."

Felix buried his face in his hands, and for a few moments he sat motionless. The detective laid his hand kindly on his bowed head.

"You will never taste a moment as bitter as this in all your life again."

"Is there no hope anywhere—no chance that something may happen to save me from this?" asked Felix, springing up and seizing Griggs's hand. "Think of what it means. If I remain silent, my life will be over, all ambition and hope will be killed in me. Just to think of that innocent man's final moments will scorch my soul. Day and night the horror of it all will haunt me, and I will never know one moment of peace while I live. But I am not thinking of myself alone. It is of him—of Raritan—the victim of this terrible fatality, of those who love him—his wife, his sister. We pity the guilty wretch who dies such a death as this—the day and hour of the ignominy set for him ; but the thought of an innocent man giving up his life that way—oh, there is nothing to approach it ! It chills the soul—it appalls one !"

The words were only a hoarse whisper, but their reality made Griggs's heart leap.

"To help you, your father must not dream that I know his real name. Remember, to me he is still Mr. Fairleigh, as he would have been, of course, had I not overheard what he said to you just now. You will be careful not to betray me?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes."

"Well, then, listen," said Griggs, placing his lips to Felix's ear. "There is just one chance. Raritan may not be convicted. Be silent until the sentence comes."

"Ah, I had forgotten that," breathed Felix. "I was so horrified at his being out there, I fancied all hope was gone. Oh, Heaven, that knowest all, let him be declared innocent—let him be set free!" and in a burst of wild sobs Felix flung himself upon his knees. Such a prayer, so full of wild entreaty, had never before crossed his young lips.

Very quietly Theodore Griggs stole away. Outside the door he paused and wiped his brow.

"If he knew that Raritan was convicted I believe he'd kill himself. Poor boy!"

Then he went out in the early day, and a few moments later the first train bore him cityward. He alighted at a spot where the country merged into the city and going down a shady, twisting side street, entered a telegraph office





CHAPTER XXXI.

THE COMING OF A STRANGER.

It was rather earlier than the usual visiting hour when Theodore Griggs entered the gates of Applethorpe and walked leisurely toward the house. He seemed interested in nothing more important than watching the marks his feet made upon the snow, and, in an unconcerned manner, a fragment of a song left his lips.

Yet the place must have been full of memories for him. How often had he walked up that path as Etienne Oudry, which now he traversed as plain, practical Griggs, whose business consisted in finding out the secret intentions of other people and reporting them to those who employed him, be they private individuals or the State.

"You will please take my card to Mrs. Raritan," he said to the footman who opened the door.

"Mrs. Raritan has just been ill, sir, and is—"

"About setting off for a journey to the West, despite the advice and expostulations of her friends and physicians. Kindly take her my card."

The man obeyed in a state of stupid surprise. He didn't suppose any one knew of Mrs. Raritan's resolve save those constantly around her, but he decided that

this stranger was probably going to accompany his mistress on the journey which he knew to be a sad and terrible one.

Theodore Griggs entered the drawing-room. It was chill and desolate in the gloom, giving mute evidence of the fact that no steps save those of a housemaid had crossed its threshold for weeks. He thought of the night of the ball at Applethorpe—the night he had seen Felix kiss Bébé in the arbor. All was different now.

A light, halting step, the rustle of feminine garments, struck on his ear, and he stood up as Vida entered. It was evident she connected his visit with the one subject which engrossed all her thoughts—this stranger had brought news of Sidney.

The sight of her face, so changed, the heavy traveling-dress hanging loosely on her wasted figure, caused Theodore Griggs a throb of pain unlike any he had experienced for years. How her dark eyes, varying in expression with a variety of emotion, tried to read his face. How her mute lips trembled, as she sank into a chair and, with loose-hanging arms that told of the despondency in her soul, waited in silence for him to address her. She had not spoken, and the theory which Theodore Griggs had arrived at from his many experiences was again verified: That when the heart is alive with fears, and the unuttered sob of suffering chokes the throat, the tongue is silent.

“My dear Mrs. Raritan,” he said, in his softest manner, and with an expression that was fatherly in the eyes usually so brilliant and keen, “you do not know me—you never before heard my name, in all probability; but I am familiar with your sorrow, and I have come to do you an act of kindness before you start on your journey to the West. Please do not think me

impertinent. There is one question I would like to ask—rather, there are two.”

Vida roused herself, and though her sad eyes remained hopeless, she listened intently. This man had evidently something to say on the subject which engrossed her every thought. But he could not save Sidney; he had not come to say that—and what did anything else matter?

“I would like to know,” he said, soothingly, “if you believe your husband guilty of the crime for which he is condemned?”

Vida’s dark eyes lightened for a second; she flung up her head, and two feverish spots marked her thin cheeks.

“I do not. I believe him innocent, let them say what they will.”

“H’m! Now, then, do not be surprised, for I know everything connected with this whole case: Do you believe the woman named Aloha was or is anything to him—his wife or his mistress?”

“Please do not ask me,” she said, in a semitone of bitterness and anguish. “I wish I could say no,” she added suddenly, with feminine inconsistency. “Oh, I wish I could! I do not know what his life may have been before I met him—I do not know what his temptations were, and what this woman was to him has been explained. I know he loved me, and I can forgive him now. Ah, yes, now—when he is—to die. What does anything matter beside that?” and her convulsed face sank to her bosom.

“Ah,” said Theodore Griggs, sadly, “that is true. Yet there are trifles that may serve to soften the blow at this time while they cannot avert it. Will you kindly read this document?” and he handed her a folded package.

She started as if stung when her eyes fell on Sidney's writing—and the package was addressed to her. A light transfigured her face, a cry of joy broke from her lips.

"He has written to me! Oh, he has forgiven me! He sent you with this to me? Oh, you must know him well—you are some friend—you pity—you believe in him?" and she clasped the hand which held the package.

"He never saw me in his life. He does not know my name. Now, please don't ask any questions which I may not answer. Take this package to the window and read what is written on the pages enclosed. They are no message to you from his cell; they were written months ago, and every word is true."

"Open it for me—I cannot," Vida faltered, as she moved to a chair by the window. The burning tears had burst from her charged heart and were sparkling upon her cheeks.

How hungrily she took the papers, and there in the crude winter light, half-kneeling and half-sitting, her eyes slowly followed every word of the story which Sidney had penned before he had married her, the night that Hastings's accusation had startled him.

When the last word was read the papers fluttered to the floor, and Vida clasped her wasted hands as if in prayer.

"Forgive!" she moaned. "Oh, darling—forgive—forgive!"

Her husband's heart had been opened before her—she saw all as plainly as if the circumstances described took place in a dream-world before her eyes. The night in the snow and the silence when he dared everything to force a villain to undo, as far as possible, his dastardly sin against a woman; the firelit hut; the

sick girl ; his tenderness for Aloha ; his resolve, as he went homeward, that nothing should ever wring the night's events from his lips !

And he had honorably kept that vow to shield a woman's name, and through this loyalty had come all his undoing.

"What shall I do with this ?" Vida cried, excitedly, rising and dashing away her tears. "Will this not help us to save him? Oh, if he had spoken—if he had told why that strange journey was taken by Allan Love and himself he need not have been convicted ; this would have cleared him ! He would not speak ; his silence about that night was one of the things that helped to condemn him. He would not speak, but I—I shall speak for him !"

She moved rapidly up and down the room, her cheeks stained by a wavering crimson, her eyes alight.

"Oh, why does not the woman whom he once righted at such cost come forward and save him now? Is she a block of wood or stone? Does she know of his position? Does she know that they are going to take his life?"

She flung herself at Theodore Griggs's feet and held out her prayerful arms.

"You know where she is, perhaps ! Oh, send for her—send for her. It is too late for her to think of herself. A man's life is at stake—a good man's life ! Oh, if you have any pity, send for her. She will be less than a woman if she does not come."

As she broke down after this wild prayer, Theodore Griggs moved to the window and arranged the shade with apparent carelessness. He said nothing, but stood looking down on the grief-stricken woman before him, a strange mist in his eyes. Was he waiting, listening for some one or something ?

It would seem so, for, at that moment, there was a ring at the door, a few spoken words and a moment later a young woman in a dark, travelling cloak entered with a surety of step as if she had been expected.

Griggs motioned to her to remain silent, and when Vida looked up, her dark, tear-blotted eyes fell upon the stranger's face. Questioningly she looked from the new-comer to Theodore Griggs.

"Who—who is this lady?" she faltered.

"The days when fairies accomplished marvels are not past," said Griggs, with a dry smile. "You called for Aloha, and she is here."

There was a breathless sob of joy, and Vida was in the stranger's arms.

"I have come to save Sidney, if I can," Aloha said, and her small, pretty, determined face was alight with a fierce purpose. "If the telling of my wretched story will free him—then he shall be free."

She was very pretty, and so Bebé thought as she now stole wistfully from the curtains which had hidden her. There was an air of the great world about her. She was dainty, with something of a French-woman's *chic* in manner and expression.

"Let us sit down together, you sad, lovely creature," she said, kissing Vida's cold cheek impulsively. "Mr. Griggs may amuse himself watching us if he likes. Now then! I didn't come on the wings of the winter wind in a chariot of cloud-foam at all. I landed in New York last night from the big *Etruria*, and Mr. Griggs met me. How did he find me out in London? I do not know; but I suppose there is nothing impossible in these days of detectives and expert testimony. Well, I first heard of Sidney's terrible position in the letter sent me by your kind friend here. An hour later

brought me a blurred scrawl from Sidney. The dear fellow cautioned me against trying to save him by any quixotic idea of sacrificing myself, as Allan Love had been murdered, and circumstantial evidence pointed to him and him only. I knew I could not tell who had murdered my graceless husband, but I knew that proceedings might be delayed and one mystery explained if I told why he went away with Allan Love, and where. So I came. And, dear, dear," she said, caressingly, smoothing Vida's bent head, "wife of my best friend, I am going with you to him. May I kiss you?"

These words so won Bebé's heart that she stole up, her flowerlike face quickened by emotion. Aloha looked at her in delight and surprise.

"Sidney's sister! I would know her anywhere. Is it not so?"

"Yes, and let me kiss you for his sake," said Bebé, shyly.

"Why, you pretty thing—of course!" and she opened her arms gladly.

What sunshine there was about her! How she revived their sinking hopes! Her smile was winsome, her voice held a note of joy.

"Are you sad to think of what this disclosure will mean to you?" asked Vida, with a sincere tenderness. "You are giving up much, and it is right; but you seem happy to go."

A smile twinkled in Aloha's eyes.

"I am happy—ah, so happy that I may be able to do something for Sidney—him who did so much for me! But the dread of shame and scandal is over. I used to dread the world. Now when my world means one big, handsome fellow, six feet two, who knows all, still loves me, and wants me—what does anything else matter? As soon as I return to England I shall marry

Lord Richard Germon, of Wessex Court. When the world—the other big, cruel world—knows that I, a trusting child, was cruelly dealt with, and turns its shoulder on me in consequence, I shall have *him*. I care for nothing else. We will go away together and live in India, in Japan, here and there, just where we please. Society will disown us. Well, having each other, we will be happy to be disowned. That's all, my dears."

Just before Theodore Griggs turned to go, he said, as if the matter was a trifling afterthought :

"Ah, my dear Mrs. Raritan, by the way, you received a letter from a certain gentleman on the night of Mrs. Frankland's ball?"

"Yes," she said, a shamed look creeping into her sweet eyes as she recalled that night, and the degradation she had suffered in her husband's eyes.

"I hope you have kept it. Have you?"

Without a word she drew it from her breast.

"Ah, you were going to show it to Mr. Raritan when you saw him?"

"Yes, to clear myself," she stammered.

"Good. Lucky you saved it. Give it to me. He will have it, never fear. Now then, a few last words. Should Mr. Hastings call here, treat him as if nothing had happened. Do not mention the name of our visitor from London. Do not appear to have a vestige of hope. Tell him to come back. Say nothing of your proposed journey to Arizona ; and, by the way, do not make any more preparations for going until you hear from me."

"Oh, impossible ! I want to go to-day. I am burning with impatience !" cried Vida. "You are thinking of my health, you do not think me in a condition for travelling ; but I shall die if I sit here inactive longer."

“You must think of your health, my dear madam. I am thinking of something else. Wait until you hear from me. Will you? Do you trust me?”

“Yes, oh, yes. I do not know who you are, but—”

“Ah, you are kind! You would thank me? No, not yet, not yet!” and, with a courtly bow, he hurriedly withdrew.





CHAPTER XXXII.

AN UNDERSTANDING.

But Clyde Hastings did not call at Applethorpe. Ever since the news of Sidney's conviction had reached him, the longing to see Vida had been almost unconquerable—to see her, to read in her face, that, while she still loved Raritan, she believed him all that he had painted him.

Oh, it was hard to deny himself this pleasure, this food to his hopes for the future. But he feared to be too abrupt, and that his appearance at such a time might so jar upon her she might experience an unreasonable resentment, and her old dislike and distrust return.

But he thought of her. At least a score of letters were written to her, only to be destroyed. He could say nothing that might not antagonize her. He could not pretend to be sorry for Sidney's fate, and it would be madness to rejoice in it, or by even a word express devotion to her. All that must come—afterward.

At times faint qualms of remorse seized him as he pictured Sidney in the far Western prison waiting for death, but he subdued them quickly. What if Raritan had been convicted by false evidence, and that the body identified as Allan Love's was not his? The fact remained that Sidney Raritan could not, dared not

tell the tale of that fateful winter night. He had murdered Allan Love—of that he was convinced. Was he to escape—to have the successful life of an innocent man, the woman he loved—just because no eye saw the deed and no tongue could be roused to speak in condemnation?

He satisfied himself by this reasoning, and while expectant, nervous, unable to settle to anything, finding pleasure and business alike insupportable, he was waiting for the days to pass which would bring the end.

“Allan Love lies murdered—somewhere,” he would mutter. “It is I who have avenged him, and the reward will be mine.”

But across this inactive life came a sudden fear, which roused him as if from a dream. He was sitting beside the window of his club, on Fifth Avenue, on the very day when Aloha entered Applethorpe. He was trying to interest himself in a French novel, but it drooped listlessly in his hand, and his eyes followed the figures on the street without really perceiving them. A waiter entered with a telegram, and on the moment he was quivering with suspense and curiosity. It meant news from Arizona, without a doubt.

He opened it, and saw written there but one word : “BEWARE.—M.”

From Markby—and containing the warning word that had been agreed upon in case of danger. Clyde Hastings’s face was very pale as he went back to his rooms, the telegram crushed in his hand. That afternoon he left town.

During the seven days that followed, Vida hoped that each morning would bring her a message from Theodore Griggs, telling her that she might prepare to go to Sidney. She had great faith in him. His quiet, forcible manner had won her ; the fact that to

him Aloha's presence on the scene was due, and that he had given her the papers which had convinced her of her husband's loyalty to herself. She would not take the step until his command came ; but, oh, how the days dragged, and how her blood ran riot with a fever of impatience ! Messages she received from him, kindly messages, but all counseling her to be patient. Patience at such a time ! It was hard to obey, as hard as if her hand was thrust into a fire and he told her not to draw it out until word came from him.

Theodore Griggs went his way much as usual. He was at the house by the river at odd times. He saw Felix Love, the companion of his wretched father, the lad now only a shadow of himself. Oftentimes, when he chanced upon him in a shadowy passage, he felt as if he had crossed the path of an uneasy spirit whose only question seemed to be : " Has he been convicted yet ? "

All knowledge of the case had been kept from him at Griggs's command.

" Wait," he had said to Allan Love, " until all is over. It would make him desperate if he knew he was keeping silence when every day and hour brought Raritan's death closer."

It was on the eighth day after Aloha's arrival at Applethorpe that Griggs, leaving his hotel, received a telegram. The message was long, and evidently needed careful mental digestion, for it was read a dozen times during his walk from the hotel to the elevated train.

If it were possible for him to change color, the telegram might be said to have accomplished that wonder. He looked graver than usual, and his lips were set as if he had an unpleasant duty to perform.

He went straight to the house by the river. Mr. Fair-

leigh was in his study, and he entered it, closing the door behind him.

"Ah, it's you, Griggs?" came from beneath the hood, and the tone was querulous, questioning. "What news? I'm almost beside myself with impatience! How long is this thing going to hang fire?"

Griggs took his seat near the door and sat in absolute silence.

After a moment his employer turned toward him in surprise, and lifted the hood a little farther from his face.

"You are silent. Have you bad news?" he asked, in a hurried breath.

"*You* will think it bad news, Allan Love," said Griggs, in his everyday tone.

His listener seemed stricken dumb, swayed, leaned upon the table for support. When he spoke again, his voice was like the voice of another man.

"What do you mean? Do—do you know what name you have called me?"

"I do. Allan Love!"

"You are mad! Or you have been drinking!"

"I am perfectly sane, Allan Love. I am speaking to *you*. I am calling *you* by your own name," and he stood up, leaned his hands upon the table and said, in a tense, sharp voice, while he brought his clenched hand down upon it: "The game's up!"

For a moment the clock's ticking was strangely loud in the room, and old Remus peered in at the doorway unseen. He had heard those last words, and, trembling in every limb, he waited for what was to follow.

"Will you explain yourself, Mr. Griggs?" said Allan Love, with difficulty. "You are talking in riddles. Speak! What do you mean?"

Griggs stood up straight, his watch open in his hand,

"I have just twenty minutes, and if you will follow me carefully we will waste no time."

The muffled figure before him remained absolutely still, but his labored breathing could be heard in the quiet room.

"My words," said Theodore Griggs, "mean just this: I have found out who you are. I know the whole story of Raritan's journey with you over the plains, your forced marriage to Aloha Brysdale, your cultivation of the suspicion that grew out there of Raritan's having made away with you. To further this you kept out of sight, not for a murderous purpose alone, but for your own safety, because soon after that night with Raritan, in some out-of-the-way village where no one recognized you or knew you, you had fallen a victim to the scourge that is more horrible than any curse in life—leprosy. Yes, you had better sit down. I could pity you for this dread affliction, but you have shown yourself a monster of cruelty. Well, you disappeared, and, unconsciously, your plot was aided by another enemy of Sidney Raritan. I refer to Clyde Hastings. I think that when I see the memorandum-book which so forcibly implicated Raritan with the killing of the supposititious Love, I shall identify it as one I saw him purloin when, as Etienne Oudry, I brushed Mr. Raritan's clothes at Applethorpe. So the matter stands. I suspected you from the first. I knew you were Allan Love the night you called out for your son when you were unconscious. I discovered that same night what terrible fate made you keep your face shrouded. Had you shown pity at the last moment, I should have pitied you, but, good Lord! you are calmly waiting to hear that Sidney Raritan has been choked to death for murdering you—you who face me now, a living man!"

All Griggs's reserve had disappeared, his voice rang out, his steely eyes were bright. There was burning scorn in the way he swept his arm out, as if to place an immeasurable distance between the man who listened and himself.

"Ah! So you knew this all along, did you? And you took my money as my paid spy, and now, for higher wages, no doubt, you betray me!" said Allan Love, his accent an insult.

Theodore Griggs put his hands in his pockets, and a questioning, mocking smile curved his lips.

"I wonder what you took me for? A detective? That I am—but what else? A spy to hound an innocent man to his doom and glut your insensate revenge? Oh, no! While I thought you the aggrieved person and my duty was to watch a man described to me as a scoundrel—very good. I have watched people of the latter class often, and have at length delivered them, with much satisfaction, into the jaws of the law. But what of this case? Good heavens, man! I find you an impostor, endeavoring to fling an everlasting stain upon the name of an honest man. I watch that man, as I am commissioned to do, and I find him a gentleman—a gentleman even to his servant, and that is hard, indeed, and most unusual. You think I really accepted such work? No, Allan Love! I turned the tables and watched you. I watched that other cold, bloodless plotter, Mr. Hastings. 'There's your money, every penny of it!' and he flung a small, tight roll of bills upon the table. 'Count it, and you will find I have not kept a penny. As to your other supposition, that I deserted you only for more money, you are wrong. I have had no communications with the other side in my capacity of detective. But I am not rich, and when Sidney Raritan is free, as he will be—mark

you that, *as he will be*—I have no doubt he will pay me for the time and effort I have freely given in his behalf. I will take his money. It's honest."

"And all this means?" said Allan Love, hoarsely.

"It means just this: You silenced your son, but I must speak! To fully clear Sidney Raritan, I have brought Aloha, your wife, from England. Her explanation of that mysterious night will help to clear Raritan, but a telegram from his lawyers, received by me half an hour ago, tells me this will not be enough. The body found must be proven beyond all doubt to be another than Allan Love. This done, the case falls to the ground, and every vestige of suspicion removed from Raritan."

"You mean," gasped Allan Love, "that you will betray me to them? You don't mean that! Do anything else you like, but, for Heaven's sake, spare me! Think of what my fate will be! I, who never humbled myself to a living being, ask you to spare me!" And his fierce, shrouded hand closed around Griggs's arm.

"Useless! This is a bad business. I am sorry for you, yes, despite all, but you brought it on yourself. A man's life is at stake. Be ready. In an hour three men from the West will arrive to identify you, and get your affidavit."

With a moan that came from a rent, cheated heart, Allan Love sank back, and Theodore Griggs, passing him hastily, left a scene that had tried him almost beyond his strength.

He met the men expected at his rooms, and went with them to Applethorpe, where Aloha was seen. It was a terrible shock for her to learn that her husband was alive, but she conquered her own personal disappointment for the great cause at stake.

"Come! Your identification will be the strongest of all," said Griggs; and she obeyed.

But when they reached the house by the river Allan Love's lips were silent. He was dead!

Heart disease? Perhaps. His heart had been weak. Yet, if so, why had old Remus carefully removed and broken the glass in which he had brought his master a last drink, just after his interview with Theodore Griggs? And what did those words mean which he muttered into the ears which heard them not:

"Massa, forgive me—oh, forgive me! 'Twas 'cause I loved you I done it! Yuh proud heart need not break by seein' them lookin' in that pore face o' yourn. This is rest and peace forever. Old Remus knew, chile, that death was bes'!"





CHAPTER XXXIII.

AS THE CURTAIN FALLS.

“When you read this, Bebé, I shall have gone out of your life forever.”

Felix wrote as far as this. Then he stopped, and looked drearily from his window to the busy street, filled with the coming and going of life in the winter dusk. How happy every one seemed, except him ! It was two weeks since his father had died—Christmas Eve. The air was filled with a flurry of snow. He heard a choir practicing a Christmas chorus in a church near by.

What a dreary Christmas ! And, worse than all, the life which stretched before him would be but a repetition of it. He was leaving his native land, and probably his next Christmas and many more would be spent under torrid suns. He was leaving the girl he loved with all the strength of his young, pure manhood. It was good-by. His eyes were burning as he gazed at his boxes all strapped and addressed for his travel on the morrow ; then impulsively seized the pen and hurried to finish his farewell.

“I have loved you, Bebé. I do love you. But I can understand that memories must arise constantly in both our minds and make a gulf which we cannot cross. When I think that

through any one related to me you and yours suffered the keenest agony which life can give—the fear of such a death—I bow my head in shame and bitter sorrow. Oh, Bebé, if only some angel could wipe away these memories from our minds, and looking only into our two hearts, say: ‘Let nothing stand between, since these two are not to blame, and know the truth of love!’ Ah, useless—useless! How could you ever look upon my face without thinking of the days—”

The sound of low voices outside his door made him pause and listen. Who could it be? He would see no one. Visitors to-day, when his heart was breaking? No, no! He covered the unfinished letter with a blotter, and motioning to his servant—who appeared from another room—to say he was not at home, he went into his bedroom, and flung himself, heart-sick and hopeless, across the bed, his face buried on his folded arms.

There was the murmur of voices, a footstep, then silence. Whoever it was, was gone. He sprang up, and, when he entered the sitting-room, saw Bebé sitting on one of his strapped trunks, the letter in her hand.

Of course, he was dreaming! He rubbed his eyes, he felt his hands, to see if they were real. She turned her head and smiled at him.

“Felix! And you were going away?” she said, with a little, reproachful cry. “You did not come to me! You took for granted that we could never be anything more to each other, Felix?”

Poor Felix felt as if his heart must surely break from a maddening mixture of pain and joy. She was so lovely, so winsome, as she stood there in the soft, dark furs, his letter in her hands, the light of love in her blue eyes.

He seized her hands, his yearning eyes dwelt upon her face.

“You read the letter, darling—”

"Yes, and I think you have been so cruel to me, Felix! Why, dear, don't you know that nothing save what you do yourself can ever make a shadow fall between us? Your father was wicked and unhappy. He hated Sidney—all that is sad. But you, dear—oh, was there a moment when you did not suffer for us? I know all from Mr. Griggs—how your father made you keep silent, because he gave you the terrible choice of betraying him. But you did not know that Sidney was convicted at the time! You wouldn't have let him die, Felix? The right would have conquered!"

"Oh, Beb, just to think of those days turns me almost mad. I would have cleared Sidney, or if I hadn't—if in some way they had prevented me, imprisoned me—I should have killed myself."

"It's all over, it's all over!" she said. "Sidney comes home to-morrow. Now, don't stand there looking at me as if you wanted to eat me up yet dared not. You look so tired, so pale. Kiss me, dear. And then—come back with us to Applethorpe."

He folded her in his arms, and in the earnest kiss which he laid upon her lips there was the new manhood which had come to him through pain.

"'With us?'" he echoed. "Who came with you?"

"Vida. She is outside. You know she was so weak after all this horrible thing was over, the doctor told her she dare not go to Sidney: and he, poor fellow, was delayed a week by one thing or another. But to-morrow, after the long journey, he will be with us."

Applethorpe was very cheery and bright on the beautiful Christmas morning, and Vida, in a soft, brown velvet robe which Sidney loved, went slowly from room to room, a look of expectancy on her face, a deep joy which filled her eyes with a holy light. Aloha was with her. They would not hear of her returning until

after Christmas ; and, indeed, she was only too glad to wait and see Sidney.

It lacked but an hour to the dinner-time at four o'clock. The chief guest of the day had arrived—Theodore Griggs—and he was busily engaged in chaffing Felix and Bebé as they sat around the fire in the billiard-room. Suddenly their merry talk was broken by the sound of carriage-wheels, and every face grew pale with an emotion that quickened the heart to tears.

It was Sidney. They watched him from the window as he ascended the steps, and though no tongue voiced the thought, each marveled and inwardly sorrowed for the look of something more than experience which had come to the strong, frank face. Sidney Raritan had stared into the face of death, and a subtle mark was left to tell of it.

No one went to meet him as they heard him pass the billiard-room and ascend the stairs to Vida's *boudoir*. They knew she was waiting for him there—alone. He entered, and the glow of firelight filling the room made a rosy circle around her. Ah, it seemed so long to wait before his arms were around her, her lips pressed to his in a rapture that was pain—such a kiss as one would give the dead, suddenly, by some miracle, brought back to life.

Vida clung to her husband, faint from the storm of emotion that held her. Oh, his young, worn face, the dashes of gray in his thick hair at the temples, telling the story of the dark hours he had passed through ! But he was with her again ! God had heard her many prayers ! He was here alive ! And he loved her as ever ! He believed in her again. All doubts were settled ! The shadows were gone, and love was supreme.

“ Wife—my wife ! ” and Sidney framed her face ten-

derly. "I have been down in the deeps, dear one, since I saw you ; but the suffering was worth all—all for this moment."

At the dinner Theodore Griggs was the life of the party. He beamed on Sidney, he beamed on Vida who sat back with such a hallowed, contented look on her sweet, pale face, he looked with fatherly interest on Felix and Bebé, and was almost coquettish with Aloha. Toasts were drunk—toasts in which all the bitterness of the past was washed away, and then, toward the last, Theodore Griggs arose, his glass in his hand :

"Two toasts, my good friends. One to an old servant, named Remus, who knew how to love and how to serve, and who, thanks to our kind hostess's liberality, has gone back to the South to die amid the scenes of his far-away boyhood in plenty and in peace. The other I drink to a very faulty and humble person—you shall join me if you will—to Monsieur Etienne Oudry, late of Applethorpe."

"Mercy ! Why to him ? That funny little Frenchman ?" cried Bebé, while all the other faces repeated the surprise on her own.

"Because I loved him dearly."

"You ?"

"He was myself ! I was that mincing valet whom Miss Bebé detested. And now a word to prove how a kind word may bear good fruit. As that humble servant I was found sniveling one day, and my master asked me why. I told him my brother was ill and far away. Ah, Etienne was a despicable little creature, but not too mean to touch his master's kindly heart. Friends, as the kindly hand fell on Etienne's shoulder and the words of sympathy left his employer's lips he registered a vow to die in that man's service if need be—and he meant it !"

"Well—well, Griggs, you are a born actor!" was all Sidney said, but his eyes were humid as he grasped Griggs's hand.

We need not follow these happy people much farther. Vida's son is now as high as her knee, and Bebé is the prettiest little matron in New York society. Aloha's story was never made public, and she reigns at Wessex Court in sumptuous style, where her American guests are always joyously welcomed. Sidney Raritan pursues his way, a happy man, and more keenly alive than ever to the suffering about him. If anything had been needed to make him more interesting, the history which throws a romantic glamour over him has done it. People look at the whitened hair and the kind blue eyes and think :

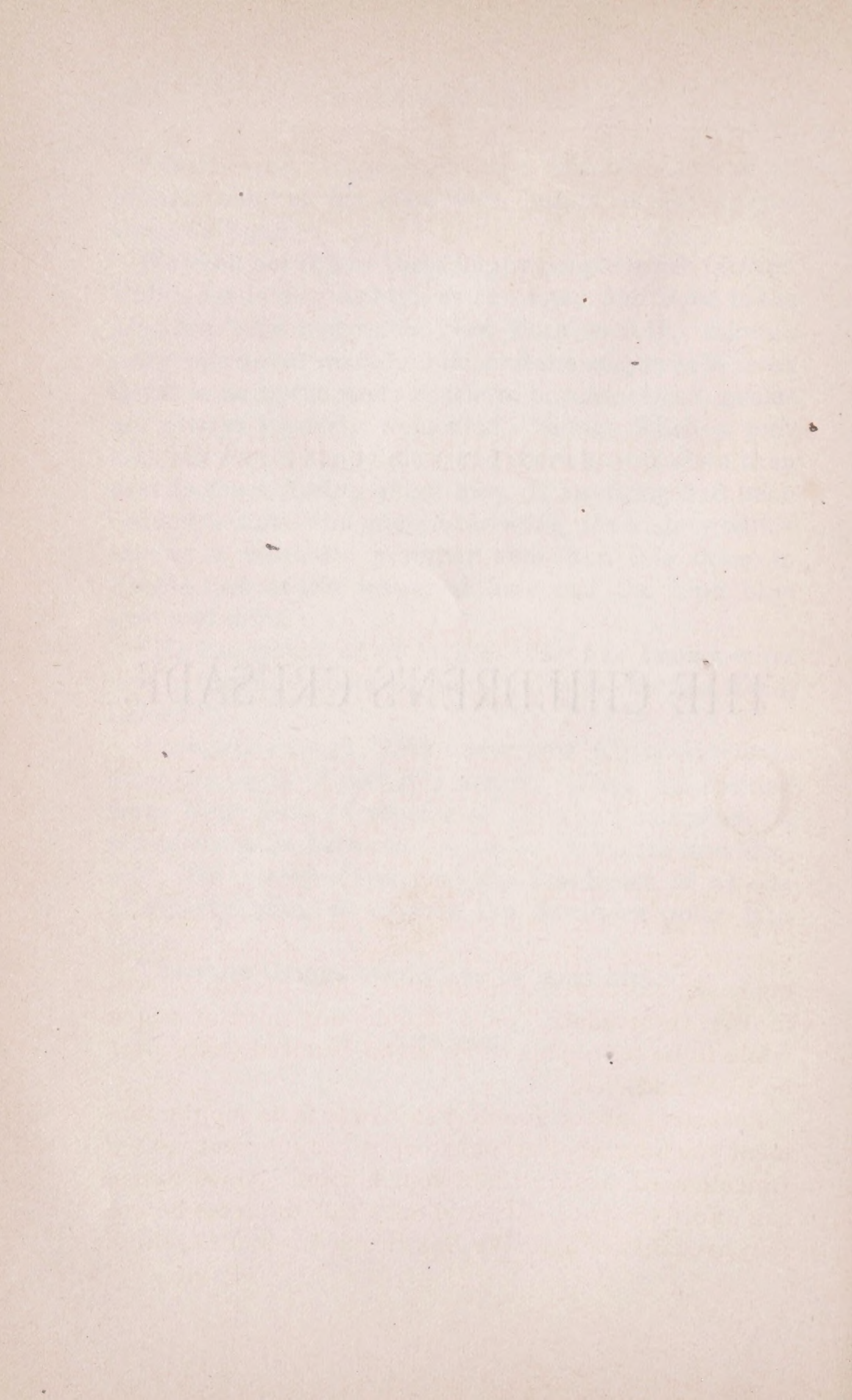
"He has tasted of all in life. He has known what it is to face an appointed hour of death—he has lived, indeed!"

Strangely enough, Vida never saw Clyde Hastings after the night of Sidney's arrest. When he hurried from New York on receipt of Markby's telegram, he put many miles between the land of his birth and himself. He is a wanderer, and was last heard of as one of a party going to explore the Southern polar latitudes.

Theodore Griggs would like to meet him.

THE END.

THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE.





✓ THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE.

CHAPTER I.

THE BOY CRUSADER.

ONCE upon a time, a boy of eighteen, riding through a country village, noticed a crowd; and, in turning aside to see what was the matter, changed the whole course of his life.

He was an ardent, romantic boy, just such as we have many to-day, and shall have, I trust, for many a year to come. He had done many a foolish thing in his haste, but never a mean one. And his heart "was in the right place," or I should not think it worth while to be telling his story, seven hundred years after he lived and died.

Perhaps some of you may shy away from me the moment you hear what an old story is coming; but, as Mr. Lincoln used to say, "hold your horses." Good things can afford to grow old; bad ones fall to pieces before they are fairly of age. We Americans are liable to think

that people who lived before us ought to be forgotten. We are so busy, boasting of the marvels of to-day, dreaming of greater marvels to be accomplished to-morrow, that we dub the events of our fathers' boyhood by the scornful title of "ancient history," and, by reason of our scorn, tumble into many pitfalls.

A certain wise Greek—never mind his name now, for I don't wish to frighten you—called history "philosophy, teaching by example." The wisest of Englishmen tell us that "histories make men wise;" while the most dishonest politician England ever had said that he liked "anything but history; for history must be false." You can take your choice between Bacon the Wise and Walpole the Cynic; but if you are boys of the right sort, from seventeen to seventy, you can go hunting for the moral that was buried in this story, seven hundred years ago.

Let us go back to our boy. His name was Stephen, after his father. The elder Stephen, in consequence of owning a large estate in a famous valley, was called "Stephen of the Valleys," which, in his native tongue—he was a man of the southeast of France—became Etienne de Vaux. Both Young Stephen and Old Stephen were called "nobles;" not, as many think, because they were thought to be better than their neighbors, but because they were "known men" in the country; from the Latin word *nobilis*. The founder of the family had been a famous soldier, a chosen companion to King Clovis, who conquered France from the Romans. When the Franks won the victory, they gave to the king's friends the Roman title of "Comites," which means "companions;" and this, in time, had been corrupted to "counts."

Young Count Stephen, being rich, healthy and happy, had never known what sorrow was in his own case.

He lived in the little kingdom of Provence, where the wars that desolated Europe rarely came. Provence, thanks to a generous soil and to a climate like that of our own Florida, was the richest part of France, and her nobles and peasants, instead of being soldiers or robbers all the year round, had leisure to cultivate the graces of life.

Young Count Stephen was well known throughout the country as a sweet singer and poet, whose verses had made him a youth of mark in the ranks of the troubadours ; and when he turned his horse toward the crowd in the market-place of Vacluse, he bore a lute at his back, and was on his way to join a congress of minstrels at the castle of his friend, Raymond Lenoir.

Not far behind the boy count, and following him on another horse, was a stout, burly young fellow of his own age, called Pierre Le Gros, or "Big Peter," from his great size. Big Peter had a shrewd, kindly face, a great deal of common sense, and a devoted affection for his young lord, whose foster-brother he was, and for whom he would have laid down his life at any time.

As Count Stephen reined in his horse at the outskirts of the crowd, he perceived that it was gathered round an old man, whose brown robe, bare feet and emaciated look proclaimed him as a mendicant friar. He was preaching a sermon of the kind that sent people wild in those days, just as a noted revivalist does in our own times.

As the careless youth neared them, he perceived that most of the people in the crowd were pale and frightened. Some were in tears ; others, with eyes flashing wildly and heaving breasts, stared at the speaker, and hung on every word he spoke, as if afraid

to lose a syllable ; while all were rapidly working themselves into a state of frantic excitement.

Count Stephen, who had heard, at Lenoir's castle, much sneering at the wild preachers of the "Crusades," nevertheless stopped to listen, and checked his horse right in front of the preacher, who saw him and instantly drew the attention of the crowd to him, on account of his conspicuous appearance.

Raising his skinny arms in the air and shaking his white beard from side to side, he called out to the careless boy, in piercing tones of warning :

"Ho, you that ride on horses, you that sing gay songs to the music of the lute, know ye that the day of wrath is coming, yea, is now at hand ! Is this a time for music and dancing, when the Cross of Christ is trampled in the dust ? Sing while the Turk defiles the sepulcher ! Dance while he spits upon the cross whereon your Saviour died that ye might live ! Ay, ay, sing on, dance on ! But remember, *the day of doom is coming !*"

His voice rose to almost a shriek as he paused for breath, staring straight at the now awe-stricken Stephen, who began to tremble, he hardly knew why, while the eyes of every person in the crowd were concentrated on him, with a fixed gaze that increased his agitation and excitement. Then the old monk went on in a lower tone, redolent of intense sorrow :

"But what know ye of the agonies that have made me an old man before my time ! Ye are safe at home where the golden fruit hangs from the green bough, where the purple grapes cluster on the trellis, where the sound of the lute lulls to sleep the conscience that naught but the voice of God can waken. But I—I have seen and heard it all. I have been in the midst of the slaughter. I have listened to the dying sigh of the

last Crusader ; have seen the fierce Turk trampling beneath his charger's hoofs the body of knight and noble. But the sins of those who call themselves Christians are so great that they are not permitted to see the Holy Sepulcher. The God of Battles demands for his service the pure in heart, the young not yet dead in sin. O thou, young man—thou that livest softly—thou from whose bright young eyes the glow of our lost paradise hath not yet faded—ere it be too late, heed the words of Him who died to save thee ; take up thy cross and follow !”

As he said this, still fixing the young count with his wildly gleaming eye, he beckoned to Stephen with his lean forefinger ; and the boy, hardly knowing what he did in his excitement and that of the crowd which surrounded him, urged his horse through the lane that seemed to be opened to him by common consent and advanced close to where the monk stood, on a high block of stone in the market-place of Vacluse.

Stephen had heard before of Hildebrand of Tours, the fit successor of the great Peter, who had preached the First Crusade a century before. Now he was face to face with him, and the eyes of all the assembly were fixed on the boy count, as the hermit spread his hands over Stephen's head, crying aloud in a tone of exultation :

“At last the Lord hath answered my prayer ! Behold the leader of the CHILDREN'S CRUSADE !”

The boy beneath him started violently, while a thrill of enthusiasm ran through the crowd, expressed in murmurs of delight at the prospect of a new excitement. The old monk cast his eyes round on the surging mass beneath him, and his lean figure seemed to grow in stature as he cried aloud :

“Stephen de Vaux, I adjure thee in the name of the

Holy Cross that thou answer me truly : *Who died to save thee ?*"

Stephen had answered that question many a time before in the catechism, without thinking of the meaning of the words he used ; but now, thrust at him as they were by the old monk in a shriek of wild inquiry, the boy trembled violently and answered in a low tone, gazing up to heaven, having instinctively doffed his cap in reverence at the question :

"My Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ !"

As he finished, his eyes filled with tears and he looked up at the sky like one in a dream.

Hildebrand clapped his hands together, his haggard face lighting up with a strange fire, as he cried aloud :

"O young man, thou hast said it ! He, the ruler of the worlds, died the death of a thief on the cross to save thee from the pains of hell ! And now the heathen defile His sanctuary, and Christian men stay at home to revel in their halls, while the false prophet sits in triumph and cries : 'Where is now their God ?' "

A low groan burst from the excitable people in the crowd round Stephen, a groan of a kind similar to those that we often hear in our day under the preaching of some great revivalist.

Men beat their breasts and wept, while the enthusiastic boy, who found himself the center of all eyes, trembled more violently than before, as he asked, in a husky whisper :

"What wouldst thou have me do, holy father ?"

The old monk caught at the question with the eager readiness of a born orator and echoed it aloud :

"What shouldst thou do ? O thou young man, when the old falter let the young take up the sword for the cross ! Behold the sign of the Holy War ! Take it on thy breast and swear to follow it till the last Turk is swept

from Palestine and the crescent of Mahound is drowned in the sea !”

As he spoke he snatched from his breast, within the folds of his robe, a simple cross of white linen and laid it on the youth, as if about to fasten it there, when the crowd burst into a wild shout :

“DIEU LE VEULT ! DIEU LE VEULT ! (God wills it ! God wills it !)”

They were as wild as the “stricken sinners” in a revival of Whitefield’s time or the enthusiasts of a camp-meeting in the woods of Virginia ; while the boy count, who had been so careless a few minutes before, was so overcome by the excitement that he hardly knew what he was doing.

With his eyes still raised to heaven, as if he saw some vision in the blue sky, he said, slowly and dreamily :

“If thou deemest me worthy of the cross, holy father, *I will take it and fight against the infidel !*”

The words were hardly out of his mouth when his foster-brother, who had thrust his way toward him by this time, but not without difficulty, called out, in anxious tones :

“My lord ! my lord ! Remember your lady mother ! Remember—”

But before he could finish there came an angry murmur from the people, and the old monk, with his fierce eyes blazing, shrieked out :

““He that will not leave father and mother for my sake hath no part in me ! Get thee behind me, Satan !””

But Big Peter, without heeding the cry of the excited old man, struggled on to the side of his young master and laid his hand on Stephen’s arm, saying hurriedly :

“My lord, my lord, consider what you do ! There

is none to take your place when you are gone, and my lady will die of grief. Think of the castle and the broad lands that need a master when the count is gone. Think of—”

But he was not allowed to finish what he had to say, for the old monk, raising his thin arms in the air, cried fiercely :

“Get thee behind me, Satan ! What are broad lands to the fires of hell ? Get thee behind me, Satan ; for thou savorest of this world ! Let him that hindereth the march of the cross look to himself ! What, ho ! Count Stephen de Vaux, wilt thou bear the cross for thy Master and win thee a place in heaven ?”

Big Peter would have answered and argued, but at the words of the old monk a hundred hands were stretched out to clutch him, and a confusion of cries arose. He was dragged half off his horse, and was forced back out of the hearing of his master, while the old monk, in the same frenzied strain as before, continued his address, accompanied by the cries and sobs of his hearers, till young Count Stephen, in the presence of them all, took the solemn oath of the Crusader.

Big Peter saw the ceremony, though he could not hear the words, as he hovered on the outskirts of the crowd ; but he saw the cross fastened on the shoulder of his beloved young lord, and knew that the deed was irrevocable. The people were wild with excitement, and a number of other boys, with even some girls—for in the great Children's Crusade none was spared—fastened the white cross on their shoulders and formed a procession, headed by the old monk, who told them that he would lead them to the plains of Avignon, where the camp of the children had been pitched. Then he told Stephen to “go to his father's

castle, and prepare for his journey and to join the crusade on the plains of Avignon, within three days, with as many as he could persuade to follow him."

Then, and not till then, Big Peter was allowed to rejoin his master, whom he found pale and all in a tremor, as if he had passed through some terrible excitement, from which he had not yet recovered.

Slowly and mechanically he rode away toward Castle Vaux, like a boy in a dream, till he was roused from his reverie by the dry tones of Big Peter, who said :

"Fine work your worship hath made to-day. What will your lady mother think of it?"

Big Peter, being foster-brother to his young lord, was accustomed to much familiarity, and was amazed when Count Stephen turned on him with an angry face, saying sharply :

"Silence, sacrilegious wretch ! Is not the sepulcher of the Lord better than fifty mothers ? Now, by my faith, Peter, this day thou hast shamed me, and I hate thee !"

The unaccustomed tone of harshness, the words, bitter as gall, all seemed to surprise and grieve the faithful foster-brother so much that he answered never a word, but hung his head, flushing scarlet ; till Stephen, seeing the effect of his words on one who loved him so deeply, continued in a more placable, tone :

"If thou hadst loved me really, Peter, thou wouldst have taken the cross with me to-day."

Peter shook his head, with a strange expression of face, saying :

"If your worship goes to Palestine, I go too ; but I don't pretend that I go for the good of my soul ! Killing men is not the way to go to heaven, or we should all be angels."

The young count flushed deeply at the words, as if they stung him strangely, shook his bridle with an angry twitch, and galloped on, till the towers of Castle Vaux rose before him above the trees.

Then he halted abruptly, saying, rather awkwardly :

"Peter, yonder comes my sister, Blanche, from hawking. I dare not trust myself to tell her. She will weep, and I have gone too far to retreat. I *must* go to Palestine, now."

They heard the sound of gay voices and horses' feet coming toward them, and through the trees shone the bright garments of ladies and cavaliers. At the head of the train rode a girl of fifteen, and, as Stephen saw her, his face grew paler, for he dreaded telling her the news that he had taken the cross. But it had to be done.





CHAPTER II.

THE QUEEN OF THE CRUSADE.

Count Stephen had no need to tell the story of his vow, for the evi'lence thereof shone on his breast as he faced the coming train. The sight of the white cross hushed the gay laughter of the young people, who were riding toward him, as if by magic; and every face became grave. They knew too well what that cross meant. The wearer had taken a vow which separated him from his fellows, as much as if had become a monk or a hermit; and, once taken, there was no means of discarding it, save at the price of disgrace on earth, and, as most firmly believed, of eternal punishment after death.

We, in our days in free America, have little idea what the Crusades really were. In the time when Count Stephen lived, they demanded their thousands of victims with unfailing regularity, and spared none. That our readers, old and young, may understand this better, a few facts may be mentioned here, to save them from the trouble of hunting them up for themselves.

The Crusades were a series of wars, carried on by Christian men, who wore crosses on their shoulders, as a sign that they would be true to the cross. The first Crusade ended in the capture of Jerusalem from the

Turks, a hundred and twelve years before the boy count heard Hildebrand preaching at Vacluse. After the capture of the Holy City, a Christian kingdom was set up in Palestine, the mark of which is still to be seen in the ruins of many an old castle, and in the Christian churches at Jerusalem itself. Fifty years after the capture of Jerusalem, the Latin kingdom was overthrown by the great Sultan Saladin, and a second and third crusade failed to take it back. From that time forth, crusade after crusade was set up or preached, all to end in miserable failure. The sixth was in progress at the time of Stephen's vow, and had languished along for eight years, in parties of armed pilgrims, who sought their way to Palestine as they could, and generally perished on the way.

Then it was, in the year 1212, that the monk Hildebrand, with the frantic idea of enlisting the aid of heaven to his enterprise, began to preach the Children's Crusade under the hope that children alone, as being free from sin, might be judged worthy of seeing the Sepulcher of Christ.

Such was the effect of his eloquence that thousands of children had been gathered together ; and at the moment when the frantic hermit proclaimed Stephen the leader of the new Crusade, fifty thousand children, of all ages, first gathered together at Vendome, in the center of France, were slowly marching toward Marseilles, supported by the offerings of the pious as they went ; singing hymns, carrying white banners and sustained by that remarkable enthusiasm which has been a wonder to the world ever since.

Stephen had heard of them, and had wondered, with the rest of his friends, what would become of them. He had heard jeers and gibes, at the folly which thought to conquer the Turks with an army of chil-

dren, and the last thing he had had in his mind, that morning, had been that he should be found among them.

Yet here he was, consecrated before all the people as the leader of the Children's Crusade, and before him was his sister, the being he loved better than any one else, save his mother, looking at the white cross on his breast as if the sight had frightened her.

He could not avoid the meeting, nor did he wish to do so, in the state of exaltation to which he had been raised by the preaching of the old hermit.

"It is true, my sister," he said, without waiting to be questioned, as Blanche drew rein in front of him, and stared at the symbol on his breast, with dilated eyes. "It is true. I have taken the cross, and Hildebrand has appointed me the leader of the Children's Crusade to drive the infidel from the sepulcher."

Blanche gazed at him silently, and her young friends with her gazed in the same sort of stupefaction. The sister of Stephen was a slight, graceful girl, hardly beyond childhood, with large dark eyes, a delicate rose-white complexion, and a disposition noted for gentleness and kindness to all sufferers. That disposition shone out now, as, instead of bursting into reproaches, as Stephen had expected, the girl, in a low voice, asked him:

"And have you asked our lady mother whether she approved of it?"

It was rather a singular thing that this question, like that of Big Peter a little before, seemed to irritate the boy count, for he drew himself up proudly, and replied, with one of Hildebrand's texts:

"'He that will not leave father and mother to follow the Lord hath no part in Him.' I have taken the cross on my shoulder and in my heart, and henceforth I belong to the crusade, with my orders from Heaven itself."

There was a low murmur among the young people around Blanche. Stephen knew them all, for they were the children of his neighbors and relatives, about his own age or younger. They had been out on a hawking-party by the banks of the blue Rhone, as their dress and the hooded hawks on wrists of boys and girls showed. Right before them rose the castle of Vaux, and round them spread the broad meadows owned by the old count. Riches and luxury, comfort and pleasure had been the lot of all there till that day; and now, at the sight of the white cross, all this seemed to be forgotten, and a general gloom spread over everything.

No one answered the speech of the boy count; and he, irritated by the disapproval he read on every face, launched out at once into a fiery speech, modeled on what he had heard from the old hermit a short time before, calling on all his young friends to join him in fighting for the cross. Like Hildebrand, he painted the terrors of hell and the delights of heaven, which were to be the portion of every one who died for the cross. Transported by his new-born enthusiasm, he forgot himself entirely, and poured forth a burst of eloquence that astonished his hearers, already disposed to believe him a hero, as having done something they dared not do. All the while he was exhorting them they gathered closer round him, and, as he paused for breath, a black-eyed girl, with a dark, rich face and crimson cheeks, cried out, enthusiastically:

"God wills it! I, too, will join the crusade and fight for the cross! God will take care of us!"

Stephen turned on her with flashing eyes, crying:

"Isabel Durance, Heaven is with thee! Thou shalt be called the Queen of the Crusade! Who follows the cross?"

"I!" and "I!" and "I!" cried several eager voices;

and within a few minutes from the time he met his sister with her friends, he had secured eager recruits from every noble family in that part of the country, and was leading them off in a tempest of enthusiasm away from the castle he dared not enter, the romantic boys and girls falling in with the idea of the Children's Crusade with as little thought of the future as if it had been a new game they were playing, which, in fact, it was, to their innocence and ignorance.

Away they went at full gallop, taking the way toward the plains that lay by the river Durance, where it was said that the great camp of the Children's Crusade had been spread ; to which circumstance the village of Vacluse owed the fiery sermon it had heard that day.

They had not far to go, when they topped a little knoll, and beheld, far away before them, a grassy plain dotted with white tents, round which the smoke of the watch-fires, just as in a real camp, rose to heaven.

The sight seemed to set the young people with Stephen wild with delight, as they raced their horses down toward the camp, headed by the enthusiastic young leader, his long curls flying in the wind, his velvet cap blown from his head, the white cross shining on his shoulder, as he spurred his slight-built jennet far in advance of all.

But in the wild race there were two people who took no part. Big Peter and the sister of the enthusiastic Stephen, both appearing as if some great misfortune had overtaken them, sat looking at each other as the children tore away, and Blanche was the first to break the silence by saying :

" Oh, Peter, what will become of them, and *what will my mother say ?* "

Big Peter twitched his face, as if he hated to answer, but when Blanche repeated the question, he said, slowly:

"So please my lady Blanche, there is but one thing to do, and that is to go and tell my lord and my lady. Perchance we may be able to stay this folly in the Childe Stephen."

"Childe" was the usual title of a youth till he became a knight, in those days, and Blanche understood Peter to refer to her brother.

For the first time since she had seen Stephen with the cross on his shoulder, she began to droop, as if about to weep, and said, in a dreary tone of voice :

"Oh, Peter! Peter! It will kill my mother! To lose her only son by this cruel crusade that sweeps high and low! How shall I tell her? I dare not. You must do it."

Big Peter gave his broad shoulders an almost imperceptible shrug, as he answered :

"And if my lady Blanche dare not speak to her own mother, how shall I, who am but a poor peasant, approach the countess with such news?"

Blanche shivered, and her soft dark eyes looked very piteous, as she said to the big peasant boy :

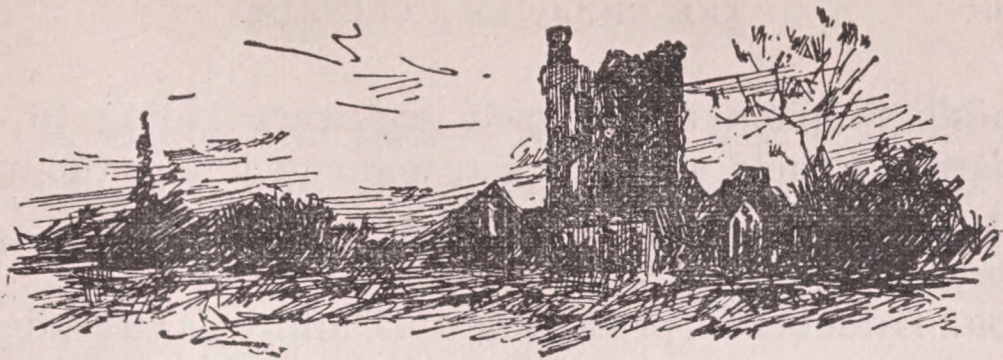
"But I love her so that I cannot give her pain. Oh, if it were but pain to myself, I would go in an instant! Oh, Peter, will you tell her, or *must* I do it?"

The big fellow closed his lips as if he were shutting a trap, and did not answer for some seconds, during which the girl watched him anxiously. At last he said, slowly :

"I will do it, good my lady, for your sake and that of the Childe Stephen. But if he goes, *I go with him.*"

Blanche nodded her little head, as she said :

"And so do I, Peter. I take no cross, but my brother shall not go into danger unless I am nigh him to pray for him and guard him as well as a weak girl can do."



CHAPTER III.

MY LADY AND MY LORD.

Blanche and the peasant-born youth rode slowly toward the castle, where Peter helped the young lady from her horse, and then, with the demeanor of a man who was going to an execution, followed her to the hall, at the upper end of which, on a raised platform called a "dais," sat the Countess de Vaux, surrounded by her ladies, engaged in the perpetual embroidery which was the occupation of ladies in those days.

The countess looked up at her daughter, as she came toward her, with a bright smile, saying :

"Well, darling, and why home so soon from the fields? Did you find no birds by the river?"

"No, my lady—that is, we—we found the sport bad," was the almost inaudible reply of Blanche ; at which the lady would have made some remark, when her attention was attracted by the spectacle of Big Peter, who had followed the girl to the edge of the dais, and stood there, fingering his cap in his hands, the picture of embarrassment and awkwardness.

"What wouldst thou, Peter?" asked the lady of the castle, thinking he had some request to make.

"So please my lady," said Big Peter, slowly, "the

Childe Stephen and myself we were riding to the Chateau Lenoir, when we saw many people in the market-place of Vaucluse; and the Childe turned to see whence was the crowd, when we found there the monk Hildebrand, preaching the Children's Crusade, as they call it, and—

Here he paused, unable to continue at the sight of the face of his beloved mistress, who turned deadly pale and seemed to be gasping for breath. She, too, had heard of the Children's Crusade, and seemed to anticipate what was coming, for she faltered brokenly:

“And he— What hath happened, Peter? Torture me not with doubts, but tell me at once. Did he listen to the preacher?”

“He did, my lady,” was the low reply; “and the preacher so worked on my young lord that he took the cross, and has gone to the camp of the children near Avignon.”

The poor lady started to her feet with a faint shriek at the news, and stood for a moment like one stunned, unable to comprehend the fullness of the disaster. Stephen was her only son, the heir of the castle, and if he were killed the inheritance of the family would go to a cousin whose land adjoined hers, and who was, perhaps, the only person in Provence that the gentle countess feared and disliked. The ladies on the dais had risen and were crowding round her, thinking she was about to faint, when she caught sight of her daughter, and, starting violently, cried out:

“Oh, Blanche, Blanche, and *you let him do it!* Why could you not stop him? Oh, my son, my son!”

Blanche answered no word to the undeserved reproof; but honest Peter interposed at once, in his bluff manner, saying:

“My lady Blanche knew nothing of it till we met her

at the castle, and then it was too late. The Childe Stephen had taken the cross. But surely my lord the count can forbid his going. It is a mad freak to send tender children to fight Turks, and my lord can stop it if he hath a mind to."

His words seemed to give great comfort to the distressed lady as she heard him, and she said, with a faint hope in her voice :

"He can ! He must ! Oh, I will go to Rome myself, and weary the Holy Father with prayers to give my boy a dispensation from this wild, this wicked vow. It is impossible that he can suffer it. Come, ladies, let us go at once to the count."

And without waiting she hurried off through the long stone corridors of the castle to find the count, who was at the time in the armory inspecting the weapons, with a grizzled old soldier, who was his manager, and whose title, in those days, was "Seneschal of the Castle."

The seneschal's name was Hugh Barbot, and he was showing the count a huge battle-ax as the ladies invaded the armory, where they were not wont to be seen, while the countess broke out into a hurried and agitated story of the way in which they were like to lose the heir of the castle by the crusade if something were not done at once to stop it.

The count was a stalwart man of middle height, with broad shoulders and legs slightly bowed at the knees from the habit of constant riding. He had been a famous knight in his prime, with a great reputation for strength, and had received so many wounds in his young days that he moved stiffly now. His temper was hasty and fierce, and as soon as he heard the story of the rash vow into which his son had entered he began to use very strong language, and swore that he

would go after the boy and bring him back by the hair of the head, if there were no other way.

"We have shed enough blood in these silly crusades," he said, with great anger; "and it is but a pretense for the monks to get hold of the estates of those who go. We have fighting enough at home to do to keep the robbers from the roads; and here is the boy who should be ready to take up my sword, when I am too old to fight, going off on a wild-goose chase after Turks who never harmed him. Get me my horse, and tell the men to saddle-up, and we will show this Hildebrand that he cannot rob us of *our* children, though there are fools in France that let him do it elsewhere."

The old knight showed so much anger and determination that the countess felt wonderfully encouraged, and helped him all he could as he hurried his preparations to get ready a troop of horse to follow the truant boy and bring him back to the castle.

Within an hour from the time that Big Peter had brought in the news of Stephen's flight to aid the Children's Crusade, Count Stephen de Vaux the elder, mounted on his charger, and covered with armor from head to foot, was riding off toward Avignon, determined to bring back his boy, or know the reason why he could not get him.

And with him rode the countess and Blanche. Would they be able to persuade the boy to come back?





CHAPTER IV.

THE CAMP OF THE CHILDREN.

Count Stephen the Elder was not fated to reach his son as soon as he had anticipated when he rode out of the castle gates, followed by his vassals, intent on bringing back the boy. The distance from Vacluse to the plains of Avignon, where the children had been encamped, was a twenty-four hours' journey, for light horses; while the train of the count, composed of men in heavy armor, who had to carry all the food their horses would need on the saddles of the animals, could not move fast enough to catch the young crusaders.

The warriors toiled on, hearing frequent reports of the progress of the Children's Crusade, which had attracted the interest and help of the whole country round. Every one they met had done something to help it on, according to his own account; for the young crusaders, with a simple reliance on the promises of Hildebrand, only possible in that age, had departed on their journey, gathering recruits at every castle and village, taking no heed what they should eat or drink, but relying solely on charity.

It is, indeed, one of the strangest things in history, hardly to be believed, did we not know it to be true,

that the children in that wonderful crusade did not all starve to death before they had gone across the breadth of France.

Their numbers fluctuated as they went, the feebler ones dropping out on the way, some of them never to see their homes again ; others, more fortunate, being reclaimed by their parents. But still the march proceeded ; and, day by day, the children neared the end of the journey they had set themselves, at Marseilles, where they confidently expected that they should find ships to take them to the Holy Land, in some way.

The boy count, Stephen, with his little train of friends, had reached the camp on the morning of the day after he galloped away from his father's castle, the horses of his little party completely exhausted, the riders tired out, hungry and ready to drop, but as full of ardor for the crusade as ever. They had been welcomed by a boy called Nicholas, supposed to be in command of the crusade, who received them in a lordly manner, as if he had been the king of the country.

Nicholas was a very different boy from Stephen ; stout and strong, with a great idea of his own importance and a habit of enforcing obedience to his orders by blows, if any one disputed them. He had led the children from Vendome, and assumed the title of "Captain of the Crusade," which to Stephen, who imagined himself appointed to that office, caused great disappointment, till the arrival of Hildebrand in the camp, when the old monk, in a public sermon, deposed Nicholas from the office of leader, on the score of his violent temper, and made the boy count "Captain of the Crusade" in his turn.

The real reason for the change Hildebrand said nothing about, but it was none the weaker. Count Stephen, coming of an old family, was one well calcu-

lated to win the respect and admiration of the children who had come on the crusade, while Nicholas, who was ignorant of reading and writing and a peasant by birth, had only his talents to win him the ascendancy.

In those days, talent, without descent from a noble family, was useless in the world, save in the church, where alone peasants could rise to the highest offices.

Therefore, when Hildebrand proclaimed Stephen as the captain of the crusade, there was no murmuring voice among the children, and even Nicholas, though he felt his deposition keenly, had to hide his chagrin ; for, in the camp of the cross, the vow made all brothers, and forbade quarrels. But what neither that vow nor any that has been invented since could prevent, was the existence of envy and jealousy, which burned as fiercely in the breasts of the children of that memorable crusade as in those of their elders who had fought one another in sight of Jerusalem, with the same hatred they showed the Turks.

Stephen de Vaux could not help seeing that Nicholas, who had been the head of the army of children before he came, hated him, and had hard work to restrain his feelings ; but the boy count, with the enthusiastic notions he had imbibed from Hildebrand, in whom he believed firmly, strove to hope for the best, and made Nicholas his second in command, in order to appease him and make him satisfied with his position.

But the peasant boy, with keen jealousy born of a sense of his inferior advantages to those of the young noble, while he felt himself Stephen's equal in everything but birth and fortune, kept a sullen face, and encouraged murmuring among the boys who had followed him from Vendome, the majority of whom were of the same class as himself.

Thus it came to pass, as they journeyed on toward Marseilles, that there was a division among the children, who had been united in enthusiasm and hope up to the day when Stephen joined them; and they had divided into two bodies by the time they had reached the sight of the blue Mediterranean; one headed by Stephen, the other by Nicholas; the latter of the two travelling several miles behind the other, and already talking of taking a different route.

And it was with this body that Count Stephen de Vaux, as he rode with his soldiers behind him, came up five days after he left his castle, and, addressing the leader, demanded:

"Where is the boy they call Stephen de Vaux, the Captain of the Crusade? I am his father."

He addressed the question to Nicholas, who was marching ahead of a great crowd of children who carried banners, like the Sunday-school processions of our own days. The peasant boy, with a haughty toss of his head, replied:

"I am the captain of *this* Crusade, and I know nothing of Stephen. They say he is somewhere in the army; but this I know, that he can never reach the Holy Land. He is but a singer of songs, and we are soldiers who can fight."

The old count looked at the tumultuous mob of boys of all ages who followed the young leader, and a smile of some amusement crossed his lip, as he observed:

"Ye are all mad together. What can boys like you do? One Turk with his scimiter and bow would scatter you like chaff."

Nicholas tossed his head still more disdainfully, as he retorted, with a look of contempt at the old count:

"You know nothing about it. The hermit Hildebrand has promised us that the Lord will work a mira-

cle for us. The sea will divide and we shall march to Palestine on dry ground. The angels will fight for us against the foe, and lightnings will strike them. Leave us and begone to thy castle. As for thy boy Stephen, if thou wilt take him with thee, it will be all the better for this Crusade. We of Orleans have resolved to separate from him and march through Italy if he is to be our leader."

Old Count Stephen saw that the boy was fully persuaded of the truth of his mission and boastings; but the dislike he showed to young Stephen struck the old man as a circumstance in his favor, as he thought of bringing back his son. Therefore he said, quietly:

"I think thou art right, friend. My son is not fit to go to the war, while thou seemest a stout lad. Tell me where I shall find him, and I will give thee this piece o' gold."

He saw that Nicholas was a peasant, and hoped that the sight of gold would render him eager to serve him. But he had not calculated on the influence of the Crusade. Nicholas showed no enthusiasm for gold, but simply said:

"Give it to the almoner behind me; the boy with the bag. We take nothing for ourselves. The Lord taketh care of us. As for thy son, I tell thee he is somewhere before us with the other body of the Crusade, and I know not where. Ride on and find him, and leave us to our hymns."

Without noticing the old knight any further, he made a signal to the children behind him, which they seemed to understand, for they at once struck up one of the grand old Latin hymns common in the Middle Ages, and from which some of our own most popular ones have come down by translation.

The sweet strains of "*Veni Creator Spiritus*," now

known as "Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly dove," were the favorite of the child crusaders ; and in spite of his anxiety and anger at the loss of his son, the old warrior could not help being affected and moved by the great burst of childish voices as they swelled out in the anthem with as much cheerfulness as if they were going to a festival, instead of marching, as he knew they must be, to their deaths, or to a slavery more cruel than death.

Without trying to question Nicholas any further, the old count spurred his horse and rode on along the great mass of children, seeing, the farther he got, that there was something very strange in the whole spectacle.

Thousands on thousands of children of all ages, from the white-headed youngster of eight or ten to the boy of sixteen, who was tall and strong for his age, strayed along, singing the hymns to cheer them, and seeming to catch strength and spirit therefrom to endure fatigues that would have moved older people to despair.

They were dusty and travel-worn ; many haggard and thin ; but still they marched cheerfully on, and from all the country round the peasants were thronging to look at the spectacle and bring them food in baskets.

Hundreds of the simple folk were to be seen trudging contentedly by the column, carrying their baskets and waiting till the children should halt to feed them. The old count noticed that the friends of the crusade were all peasants, and that if a party on horseback, composed of rich people, passed by, they turned away from the spectacle as if it were a disagreeable one and galloped away with many a sneer and laugh.

Without knowing how it came about, he found himself, as he rode along, more and more impressed with

the spirit of the children, and wishing them well ; though his determination to get back his son was as strong as ever. As he began to near the head of the column in which Nicholas was marching, he saw, some little distance ahead, the rear of a second column. Realizing that Stephen must be with it, he urged his horse on and came up with the leading body of children.

He had no sooner done so than he was impressed with the fact that they marched in much better order and seemed to be better provided than the wandering rabble that stuck to Nicholas. The children under Stephen's orders seemed to be of all classes, but they were older and stronger, and there were no little boys and little girls among them, while many had horses and seemed to be officers, who kept the rest in the ranks.

The old warrior turned to his wife, who was with him, and said in a tone that he could not help being proud :

"Blood will tell, my lady. Our boy knows something of war already, young as he is. See, some of his children are armed, after a fashion, and they are divided into companies under banners. If they were but ten years older, who knows what they might do ?"

But the countess only shuddered as she replied :

"Oh, my lord, my lord, what will become of them ? Let us hasten and make the poor, deluded boy come back. To think that all these tender beings should be going to their death and none to stay them ! It is a monstrous thing ! Let us hasten onward."

They rode past the column, seeing that the country people were gathering from all round thicker than before, till they caught sight of a white banner far in advance, and almost at the same moment heard the

long, sweet note of a bugle sounding a signal which brought the children to a halt at once.

The moment they halted, the peasants, who had followed them, came up with their baskets, and the children, with an eagerness that showed how hungry and tired they really were, began to struggle for the food which was brought to them and carry it off to any place they could find where they could sit on the grass, rest and eat.

The old count, glad of the halt, rode on, and soon saw, beside the white banner, which had been set up at the head of the column, the well-known form of his son, sitting on his pony and surveying the scene with the air of a general who knows his business.

The young count did not offer to stir when he saw the glittering train of men-at-arms coming up, though he must have suspected the cause. Beside him stood the emaciated form of the hermit Hildebrand, and round him were grouped the friends whom he had persuaded to follow him. Conspicuous among these was Isabel Durance, who had assumed a sort of armor, with a crown of gold round her light helmet of steel.

Even the old count, who was disposed to feel angry with every one who had anything to do with the flight of his son, could not help a slight sense of hesitation, though he rode up to the young chief of the crusade, followed by his men, and saluted him with grave severity, saying :

"This is not well done, Stephen. Thy mother and Blanche should have been enough to keep thee at home, even if love for thy father had been a thing not counted in these days."

The boy count averted his eyes from those of his father, and his tone was cold and haughty as he answered :

"I have taken the cross for your sake and that of my family. I have sworn to drive the heathen from Jerusalem, and when I come back I will pray that your sins may be forgiven you. Tempt me not, but return home. This holy man will tell you that it is *impossible* for me to look back now that I have taken the cross."

The count was nettled at the tone in which the boy spoke, and rapped out, angrily :

"How is this, malapert? Dost thou not respect thy father? I tell thee that I *forbid thee* to go on any such mad expedition. As for this mad priest who has tempted ye all from your duty, he should have his frock stripped from him by his bishop, and be scourged in broad daylight through every market-place where he has enticed the children of nobles to destruction."

He had hardly spoken the words, when the old monk, who had stood a little apart watching his pupil curiously, to see if the appeal of the count would have any effect, called out, solemnly :

"Get thee behind me, Satan, for thou savorest of this world ! He that will not leave father and mother for the cross, hath no part in it. Depart, thou cursed one, or it will be worse for thee !"

The old count instantly turned on him fiercely, and shouted :

"This to a count of Provence ! Now by our Lady of Vacluse, I will take order with thee if thou speakest another word. This is my son, and I say that he shall not be carried away, to perish by the sword of the Turks ! Stephen, on thine obedience I command thee to follow me, or I will have thee taken home tied to a horse ! Dost thou hear me, boy ? This is not child's play, I tell thee. I am a man and thy father. Who dares bid thee disobey me ?"

Young Stephen hesitated, and seemed moved by the appeal ; for he looked at the monk as if asking help. And Hildebrand instantly came forward to the side of the old count's horse and raised his thin arms menacingly, saying :

“ Away with thee, rash man, and strive not to stay the march of the cross ! Beware the wrath of heaven and the curse of the church ! I tell thee thou hast no authority over a warrior of the cross ! ”

The old count laughed aloud, but savagely and fiercely, as he roared out, at the full stretch of his lungs :

“ What ho, vassals of De Vaux, rescue your young master, and bring him away from this camp of madmen and babies ! ”

The moment he said it, Hildebrand cried in answer:

“ Warriors of the cross, defend your captain ! Drive hence these men of Belial ! ”

Immediately, with a shrill cry, all the boys sprang toward the old count.





CHAPTER V.

THE APPEAL TO HEAVEN.

The struggle between the old count's train and that of the boys in the Children's Crusade was brief and decisive. The count was a strong man and had twenty burly men-at-arms with him, but they were overwhelmed in a moment by the immense number of their opponents, who came in swarms round the horses, before the soldiers fairly understood what was being done. The imposing figure of the old monk, as he thundered forth the curses of the church on any one who should presume to interrupt the crusade, had its effect on the men, who were superstitious to the last degree; and they did not try to fight, as they might have otherwise done. The sight of the boys, so peaceful a moment before, turned to little demons by the voice of the priest, had its effect on the soldiers also; while they could not rescue their young master without drawing swords on a lot of children.

Before they knew where they were, each horseman was seized by at least twenty boys tumbling over one another in their eagerness; tearing them from their horses by main force; taking their arms from them, and then standing above them, ready to pin them to the ground with their own swords and spears if they ventured to resist.

Old Count Stephen, in the grasp of some dozen boys of eighteen, ropes thrown round his limbs as he struggled, was dragged from his war-horse and thrown to the ground, when a big boy, holding up the sword he had wrenched from the old warrior's hand, cried out to Hildebrand :

"Shall I slay the misbeliever, holy father?"

The boy, an ignorant peasant, evidently thought he had got hold of a Turk in disguise, or something of the sort.

For a moment the hermit hesitated. His flashing eye showed that he was very angry, and he actually seemed tempted to give the signal for the death of the count, when Blanche de Vaux, with a scream of fear, and followed by her mother, urged her horse in by the side of the big boy, crying :

"It is my father! My father! Would you slay a good Christian as any here? Shame on such crusaders! Stephen, hast thou no shame in thee? Is this the crusade against the infidel? Stay his hand!"

Young Count Stephen, with a face that had become very pale in the excitement of the moment, cried out to the boy with the sword :

"Enough, Jacob! It is my father, and it is written : 'Honor thy father and thy mother.' Let him rise."

Old Hildebrand seemed to be glad that the youth had taken the decision of the matter from his hands, for he made no resistance; and in another moment the old count, sorely shaken by his fall, his face white with anger and shame at his discomfiture, rose slowly from the ground and faced his son, saying, bitterly :

"Thou didst wrong to stay his hand. Better death than shame, and thou hast put me to open shame."

Young Stephen colored deeply, and the tears came into his eyes as his father spoke; but the old monk,

who saw in his face signs of yielding to feeling, cried out, sternly :

“He that is not with us is against us. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon. ‘Let the dead bury their dead,’ saith the Lord. ‘Follow thou me ! They that follow me, the same are my brother and sister and mother,’ saith the Lord.”

It seemed as if the old man was gathering together all the harsh texts and expressions he could find in the New Testament to hurl at the boy, and stifle in him the feelings of natural affection to his parents, which at that moment were struggling hard to make themselves heard and known.

Young Stephen shuddered violently as he listened to the fierce denunciations. He had become used to the application and misapplication of texts on all occasions, interlarded with common discourse, according to the customs of the crusaders, and they did not jar on him as they would do to one educated in the more correct taste of to-day. He believed in every word the old monk spoke, and held that it was his duty to leave his father and mother, to stifle all natural affection and to devote himself to killing Turks for the rest of his life, if the monk could only justify it by some text.

What was his astonishment, therefore, when Blanche, his gentle little sister, who had never till that day dared to raise her voice, and who was noted as a devotee in the castle, suddenly spoke up to the haughty old monk, though her mother was cowering in dismay at his words, never dreaming that she could answer them.

The countess had not said a word since she had come on the ground, contenting herself with gazing at her son silently, but in a way that she knew had a great effect on him, for he dearly loved her.

But Blanche de Vaux, as Father Hildebrand thundered out his texts, suddenly turned her horse toward him, and called out in her fresh, young voice :

"Thou art a false prophet, much I fear me, Hildebrand, and dost not preach the truth that saveth us."

The old monk was so much astonished at the unlooked-for assault that he actually started, and inquired unguardedly :

"What means the child?"

"I mean this," said Blanche, undauntedly : "The Lord said, on earth, that not one jot or tittle of the law should pass away till all should be fulfilled. The law is the commandments, and thou are here teaching these children to abandon their parents, and to expose the lives that God gave them to the sword of the Turk for no good but to swell thy vanity. Out upon thee for a vile man, that wouldst rob a mother of her children and a sister of her brother !"

The old monk seemed staggered by her complaint, for he said :

"I entice none. They are here by their own consent, and their parents have blessed them—all but thine—and who are they that they should stand in the way of the Crusade that will win back the Sepulcher of the Lord from the infidels?"

The countess here found courage to speak, when she saw that the hermit would listen. With clasped hands and streaming eyes she addressed him, imploringly :

"Good hermit Hildebrand, gracious Hildebrand, hear me, and spare a poor, distracted mother her only son. Why should I, of all the mothers in France, be compelled to give up my boy to the Turks? If thou wilt but wait till he grows a little older, and is arrived at the full stature of man, so that he may support the

fatigues of war, cheerfully would I grant him leave to go with the warriors of the cross to defend the holy sepulcher. But what can these children do against men? What can their tender arms avail against the swords of the Turks?"

She had made a bad argument, and the hermit saw it, for, with a sardonic smile, the old man pointed to her husband and his soldiers, who were all prisoners and bound, and observed :

"Methinks they have shown ye already what they can do to armed men. The Lord will give them strength, for they are his children, and his strength will be on them. Get thee behind me, Satan!"

"But surely thou wilt not let the poor boy go without the blessing of his mother?" asked the unhappy lady, piteously.

Hildebrand shook his head.

"That will not be necessary at all. Bless him, and the blessing will return on thee. But it is all one whether ye bless or curse. The cross on his shoulder hath given him a power to bless that none other in the world can show. He is as holy to-day as a monk in the chapel saying mass."

Here Stephen, addressing his mother, said, in a broken tone :

"Dearest lady mother, why shouldst thou fear for me? I am under the protection of Heaven ; and what errand can be holier than that of rescuing the Sepulcher of our Lord from the grasp of the unbelievers? Think what a triumph it will be when we regain it, and are able to sing praises on the very ground where he preached and gave healing to the nations."

His mother, shaken by his appeal, could not answer him, and even the stern face of the old count softened; for, like all in his day, he was superstitious to the last

degree, and the boy had struck him in his tenderest point.

With a groan, he said to his wife :

"It is our fate, my lady. We cannot take him from the crusade without a deadly sin ; and, after all, perhaps he will be taken care of. Truly the errand is a blessed one, if he were but a little older."

Father and mother seemed to be alike conquered, in spite of themselves, when Blanche, with the same fearlessness that had already astonished the old monk, addressed her brother, saying :

"Thou sayest words of folly, Stephen ; and thine errand is a *bad one*."

And just as had happened with the monk, the boy count seemed to be surprised at her boldness and puzzled as to her meaning, for he answered her hesitatingly :

"What meanest thou, Blanche ? How can the crusade be unholy or bad ? Art thou against the voice of the church ?"

Blanche was but a girl, but she had all a woman's intuitive perception of shams, though she could not have told the logical reason of her feelings. With a toss of her little head, she spoke out :

"Thou sayest that it is a holy task to rescue the Sepulcher of our Lord from the Turks by slaying all that come in thy way ?"

"It is a holy war," replied Stephen, sharply. "Darest thou deny it ?"

"Then, if it be a holy war, God will be with ye at all times," the girl retorted. "He gave the land of Israel to the Jews, and they prospered. But He hath permitted the Turks to take it from the Christians, and therefore it seems that He hath shown us plainly that He careth nothing for the sepulcher wherein the body

once lay that is now in heaven. I say that this mad crusade, which is begun against our fathers' and mothers' advice, will end in disaster, as others have, and that the wrath of God will smite thee for disobedience to the commandments. Thy days shall *not* be long in the land, and all with thee shall perish, even to the priest that has led ye into sin."

Her words were listened to in silence ; but as soon as she had finished, the old hermit, who saw that they had produced a great effect on all the young people there, the more so that they were entirely unexpected, ran forward and cried out angrily :

"Who is this child that presumes to lecture her elders on their duties? Let her keep silence and retire, or heavy will be the penance on her for her insolence."

Then he broke forth into one of his impassioned harangues, which had already produced such an effect, wherever he had been in the habit of preaching, addressing himself alternately to the old count, the countess and the children of the crusade, till he had wrought them up to the old pitch of enthusiasm ; and even old Count Stephen, with a fervency that he had never dreamed he would be called on to exhibit, joined in the cry of the crusader :

"DIEU LE VEULT ! DIEU LE VEULT !"

The children were shouting, weeping, praying aloud, wild with excitement ; the poor countess, unable to resist the contagion of the scene, had ceased to hope for her son ; and the only person who seemed unmoved by the cries and confusion was the quiet little girl who had never raised her voice at home.

Stay ; yes, there was one other ; but he was a mere peasant, and his voice, had he dared to raise it, would not have been heeded. Big Peter, who had followed

the old count's train, had not attempted to join in the struggle which had resulted so ignominiously for the soldiers of the party, but had sat on his horse a little retired from the rest, looking on at the scene with an unmoved countenance.

When the hermit concluded his sermon and called on all present to "join the crusade or depart therefrom as disturbers," the count and his wife advanced and solemnly embraced the boy count, taking their departure as those who never expect to see their loved one again in life. Then the old hermit spoke to Blanche, saying harshly :

"Now, damsel, depart also ; or, if thou wilt remain, take on thy breast the same cross as the rest."

Blanche shook her head and urged her horse beside her brother, saying simply :

"If Stephen will not drive me away, I will remain with him and share his perils ; but I will not pretend that I do so to save my soul. I go to help him ; but *I will not take the cross.*"

Stephen seemed to be affected by her speech, for he took her hand and said before the old priest :

"Then, by the cross on my shoulder, sweet sister, thou shalt stay with me and depart when thou pleasest. When danger comes, thou shalt be sheltered from it."

"I wish nothing of the sort," she replied. "Bound by a vow I will not be ; but we shall see, ere this crusade is over, whether those who are sworn to stay will do as well as she who goes willingly."

Then Big Peter came up beside his young master's horse, saying :

"I am my lord's foster-brother, who never deserted him yet in danger. Will my lord let me go with him to Palestine ?"

Stephen looked surprised.

"And why shouldst thou go to Palestine? Thou hast no vow to bind thee, as I have, and the journey is full of peril."

Big Peter shrugged his broad shoulders indifferently.

"That is all one to me, master. If a tender child like the lady Blanche can go with thee, I can do the same without a vow. We will see who goes farthest on the way to Jerusalem ere we have finished. If the hermit will let me, I will go."

Stephen threw up his head rather haughtily.

"*I* am the captain of this crusade, and what *I* say will be done. I shall be glad to have thee with me as of old, to help me as thou hast been wont to do. Now let the trumpets sound the advance, and we will set forth for Marseilles."

Big Peter, with a slight smile that he could not suppress, noticed that the old hermit did not attempt to control the young crusader, but permitted him to have his own way, as the trumpets sounded the advance, and the children resumed their march.

Hildebrand, like Peter the Hermit before him, as soon as the crusade was fairly on its way, assumed no authority, but followed in the ranks as one of the rest. The captain of the crusade was evidently as jealous of his authority as Nicholas had been; though he exercised it in a different way. He gave all the directions to the bodies of children to march and halt. Big Peter and Blanche, whom he permitted to accompany him, were treated with a distinction that did not extend to the hermit himself, save when he was preaching.

Thus they marched on for the rest of the day; and, when night came, were within a few miles of Marseilles, the peasants from all the country around flock-

ing to feed them, as had happened all through the journey.

As soon as camp was pitched, the young leader of the crusade told Big Peter to follow him, and called for a mule for Father Hildebrand, who accompanied them to the city of Marseilles. It was a fine, moonlight night and they could see their way plainly, while the population of the country round had brought torches and lanterns, and were turning night into day in the excitement which had accompanied the Children's Crusade wherever it went.

The old monk went with him because his services would be needed in dealing with outsiders. The children obeyed their leader well enough ; but grown men would listen to the hermit where they would have hesitated to treat with a boy, even of Stephen's family. Hildebrand had found a merchant named Charles Marcel, who had promised that he would furnish shipping for the children to Palestine, and he agreed to perform his promise as soon as he heard that the crusade had arrived.

Then they rode back to the camp, and found it in a state of great excitement, for word had just come to them that Nicholas had refused to remain under the orders of Stephen any longer, and had turned the course of his march toward Italy, while they had been disputing with old Count Stephen. The crusade was breaking up.





CHAPTER VI.

THE TURKISH GALLEYS.

This news proved true ; and the children commanded by Nicholas separated from those under Stephen and marched toward Italy, the peasants on the way receiving them with all the demonstrations of welcome which had greeted the whole body wherever it had gone.

The old hermit, at first inclined to persuade Nicholas to come back, had encountered, in Stephen, an unexpected obstacle. The young count had absolutely refused to be bound by the orders of the old man, and declared that he was Captain of the Crusade, and as long as he performed his vow he would take orders from his own conscience. He insisted that, the ships being ready to take the children, it would be a tempting of Providence to let go the opportunity that might never return ; and the old hermit was compelled to acquiesce, and embarked on the evening of the second day after their arrival at Marseilles.

Then it was found that the crusade, which had already torn so many children from their parents, had been unable to keep them together, as the hermit had hoped. Thirty thousand children had come from Vendome with Nicholas ; twenty thousand of these had gone off with Nicholas on their way to Italy ; and half

of the rest dropped off at Marseilles, leaving five thousand only as the strength of the crusade that was to capture the sepulcher from the Turks.

The same number of grown men, picked warriors of Europe, would have been too feeble a force under the best general in the world : but such was the enthusiastic confidence of the age in its wild enterprise that half the population of Marseilles came down to see the children embark, and the ships sailed out of the harbor, the boy warriors singing the hymn of "Veni, Creator, Spiritus," with the cheerful confidence that they had only to show themselves for all the Turks in the East to fall down and abjure their religion.

Still, there was something about this crusade, under the boy count, which made it different from others of those ill-starred enterprises. Stephen, boy as he was, had a brain that was strong and sensible, though his romantic belief in the dreams of the old hermit had carried him away. He had but five thousand boys with him ; but they were all armed, by the offerings of the pious, on the way ; and, had they been men of experience, might have rendered a good account of themselves. The youngest on board the fleet was sixteen, and the majority were as old as Stephen himself. Moreover, they were for the most part youths of noble families, who had been brought up to the exercises of arms, in a way with which we are unfamiliar to-day. They could all shoot the bow or cross-bow—the latter a weapon then being introduced in France, though not yet common. They all had armor of some sort, if only a helmet and buckler ; and provisions were plenty on the fleet, thanks to the offerings of the pious people of Marseilles and Provence in general.

Besides the boys, who were the warriors of the expedition, there were nearly a hundred girls on the

fleet, under the leadership of Isabel Durance, who had been crowned Queen of the Crusade, with due solemnity, by Hildebrand, just before their departure from Marseilles.

Their duties were to wait on the sick and wounded, when such were to be found in the fleet, and among them Blanche de Vaux was the only one who did not wear the cross on her shoulder and obey the orders of the Queen of the Crusade.

In fact, it was easy to see that the same jealousy that had existed between Stephen and Nicholas, which had broken up the children's crusade into two bodies, was operating between Isabel and Blanche, but in a different way. Blanche did not like Isabel, who returned the compliment with interest, though both were evidently fond of Stephen, for they were always near him.

But likings and dislikings apart, the wind blew fair for the young crusaders and the skies were bright, and the boy count, as he stood on the lofty carved stern of the galley in which he led his little fleet, wore an expression of rapt enthusiasm on his handsome young face, as he said softly to Blanche :

"At last, my sister, we are on the way to the land which was once trod by the feet of our Lord. Dost thou not feel already the blessing of Heaven rests upon us?"

Blanche sighed slightly. Isabel, who was on the other side of the young leader, answered for her, in her usual impetuous way :

"The lady Blanche is not with us, though she sails with us. But when we plant the banner of the cross on the towers of Jerusalem, then shall she wish that she had taken the cross herself."

"Not so," replied Blanche, steadily. "It is one

thing to see Jerusalem and another to take the cross and kill men in the name of the God who said, 'thou shalt not kill.' We shall see Jerusalem, but the sight will make none of us the better."

"How sayest thou?" asked the young count, sharply; for the speech of his sister, in opposition to his dreams, always irritated him, dearly as he loved her. "We shall see Jerusalem, but the sight will make none better? What folly is this?"

Blanche turned her dark eyes on him with a strange, yearning look, that haunted him many a year after, as she replied:

"We shall see it; *but not as conquerors*. The time is coming, and that soon, when we shall see *whether God is with us or not*."

The young count struck the bulwark of the galley impatiently with his gauntlet, as he cried:

"Now, by the cross on my shoulder, sister, if thou hadst thought that, thou shouldst never have come with us."

Big Peter, who was standing nigh them, behind his young lord, here coughed slightly, and Stephen, in the same angry manner as that with which he greeted his sister's words, turned on him fiercely, saying:

"And thou, too? Dost *thou* think we shall end in disaster?"

Big Peter compressed his lips, and after a short pause, said in a tone of great gravity:

"What a man like me thinks, will not alter the case, my lord. I came to follow my lord, and die for him, if need be. A man can do that, and the angels will find him, whether he have a cross on his shoulder or not."

The impetuous but warm-hearted boy held out his hand to his faithful servant, saying:

"I was wrong to chide thee. Thee, at least, I can trust to fight. To-morrow will show us."

"Ay, ay, my lord," said Big Peter, slowly. "To-morrow will show ; and it will be seen then whether the hermit Hildebrand be a prophet as he says or what my lady Blanche called him."

And this time neither the boy count nor Isabel said a word. The speech of the young vassal had cast a shade of thoughtfulness over them all, as they realized that they had gone too far to recede.

Still the heavens continued as fair and pleasant as could be desired, and the northerly breezès wafted on the little fleet. There were ten ships of burden, equipped with sails only, very broad and bluff in shape, in which the majority of the boy crusaders had embarked. They were trading-ships, not meant for battle ; and to guard them in the fight, there were five galleys—long, low vessels, with rows of oars on either side, pulled by crews of slaves, whose dark faces showed that they were Arabs or Turks—which, in truth, they were. They had been taken captive in the previous crusades and were chained to the benches on which they sat, performing their tasks in sullen silence, under the lash of the masters set over them.

It was a remarkable thing that the Christians, who were so loud in their complaints of the cruelties of the Turks toward Christian slaves, practiced the same or greater cruelties on all the unfortunate Moslems who fell into their power. It was also remarkable that the young crusaders, whose youth should have made them tender-hearted naturally, showed toward their rowers in the galleys, on that memorable crusade, even more cruelty than the grown sailors who manned the fleet. Blanche de Vaux and Big Peter, who wore no crosses on their shoulders, were the only people in the fleet

who seemed to pity the unfortunate creatures in the least ; and soon after the conversation in which Big Peter had shown himself capable of rousing in the young count the first thoughtful mood he had yet shown, the Lady Blanche, followed by the faithful vassal, went forward, past the benches of the rowers, and actually arrested a blow that was about to fall on the shoulders of one of the unhappy creatures, who had fallen half over his oar as if completely exhausted with fatigue or sickness.

"Shame on thee for one who calls himself a warrior of the cross !" she said, indignantly, to the boy who had raised his stick. "Is that the way to follow the cross ? It is written : 'If thine enemy hunger, feed him ; if he thirst, give him drink.' Is that the way thou followest the Scriptures ?"

The boy crusader curled his lip, though he did not dare to resist the sister of his young leader.

"We shall all be forgiven our sins if we reach the Holy Sepulcher," he said. "As for these Turks, they are misbelievers and they deserve death and stripes. One infidel the less will never be missed."

Then he went away forward, and Blanche turned toward the young slave whose attitude of exhaustion had brought on him the correction. The poor young man—for he was barely twenty—had a dark but exceedingly handsome face, though it was thin and sickly-looking. His large dark eyes were full of gentleness and appeal as he cast on the beautiful girl who had saved him a glance that told of his thankfulness. Something in that looked stirred all the pity in Blanche's breast, as she inquired :

"What is thy name, friend ? Art thou sick ?"

The young slave bowed his head over his oar with a deep sigh as he answered in broken French :

My name is forgotten among my people, lady. No one remembers the slave. If he be well, they beat him ; if sick, they beat him harder. But Saphadim will not forget the lady in the last day."

"In the last day?" echoed the girl, puzzled. "What meanest thou?"

Saphadim glanced up at Big Peter, who was looking at him in his usual stolid fashion, not showing much expression on his face. The girl understood the glance, and answered :

"Speak out. We have no cross on our shoulders, and will not harm thee."

The dark eyes of the young Turk blazed with a singular fire as he replied in a low voice, as if afraid of being overheard :

"In the last day, when the angel Azrael shall lead the true believers over the bridge Al Sirat, Saphadim, who has never yet omitted his prayers, will ask of the angel a boon to lead with him the lady who showed him pity, though a Christian. The rest shall be plunged in the fire that never dieth, where Eblis reigns forever."

Big Peter, with a slight smile to his young mistress at her look of puzzlement, observed dryly :

"My lady sees that the Christians are not permitted to have all the cursing to themselves. This miscreant can curse as well as old Hildebrand ; and the Turks have their own hell for us, it seems."

"But what is the bridge Al Sirat?" asked Blanche, curiously.

"It is the bridge over which all souls must pass at the last judgment," said the Turk, solemnly. "It is the edge of a sabre, fine as a razor, and beneath it are the fires of Eblis, or Sheitan. Into that fire will fall all who cannot call on the name of the prophet and hold the hand of the angel to guide them aright."

"And thou wilt ask the angel to let me come with thee?" asked the girl, curiously.

Saphadim bowed his head solemnly.

"I will, because thou art the only Christian that hath taken pity on a true believer, in his affliction."

Big Peter, with the same half-amused smile, asked in turn :

"And where shall I go, friend Turk?"

Saphadim turned and eyed him narrowly, and then resumed his weary task at the oar, saying, gruffly :

"Thou wilt go where it pleases God to take thee."

The big fellow laughed as he turned away, remarking to Blanche :

"'Tis the truest word spoken yet on this galley. That shall we all do, and it will be all the same in the end."

Then the two strolled away along the line of the rowers ; the lady, by her presence, checking a great deal of the brutality that was shown to the unfortunate prisoners at the oars, till the evening came on, and the wind fell with it, when the ships of burden took down their sails in the cautious fashion of that day, and the whole fleet rested for the night, not daring to sail on, in the absence of the compass, which makes navigation so easy in our days.

Quiet brooded over the fleet till morning, and even the poor slaves at the oars were allowed to sleep in their places as well as their long chains would permit. But the first blush of the morning brought them all up, and as soon as it was daylight they perceived that a number of sails were visible right ahead of their fleet.

The intelligence spread through the fleet rapidly, and as the sun rose and disclosed the strangers more plainly, the young crusaders saw a number of galleys

sweeping down toward them under oar and sail, with the red flag and golden crescent of the Turkish standard displayed from every mast-head. Their enemies were already on them, though they were only just out of sight of the coast of France, while the island of Corsica rose on their left hand, with its barren chains of mountains. They had expected to find the Turks in the Holy Land, but the Turks had found them on their own coasts.

Then one might see of what stuff was made every member of the Children's Crusade. The old hermit, who had preached so bravely in the market-place of Vacluse, had turned pale and was saying his prayers by himself, with a strange expression of fear. The boys who had been vapping the day before of the number of Turks they were going to kill, had become silent all of a sudden ; while the quiet ones, with pale faces, were looking to the strings of their cross-bows and getting ready for the battle that even the children saw could not be avoided.

The boy count, his fine face full of enthusiasm that knew no fear, was encouraging them to fight bravely for the cross and promising the joys of heaven to those who fell early ; while Isabel, the queen of the crusade, with her little band of nurses, was busy getting the linen bandages ready for the expected wounds.

They had not long to wait, for it was evident that the Turks had been lying in wait for them and were coming down with bad intent. In their fleet there were fifty or more galleys, and they came on with a rapid impetuosity that showed they expected an easy victory. Within half an hour from the time the sun rose, they were close to the fleet of the Children's Crusade, and the sounds of their drums and fifes—for the Turks were the inventors of that sort of military music

—could be plainly heard mingled with the hoarse shouts that accompanied their advance.

The nearer they came and the louder they shouted, the more subdued was the appearance of the young crusaders. Even the boy Stephen, who had been dreaming of an easy victory, began to change countenance, and went up to the old hermit, saying :

“Arouse thee, Father Hildebrand ! The unbelievers approach ! Now is the time to encourage the laggards in the fleet.”

To his amazement and incredulous anger, the old man faltered and broke down, murmuring, confusedly :

“It is not the place of a monk to fight. ‘Vengeance is mine, and I will repay,’ saith the Lord. Pray that ye may be helped, as Gideon was, by a miracle. Alas ! my son, we have fallen on evil days !”

Then there was no more time for talk, for the shouts of the Turks grew louder and more menacing as they came ; and the young leader, with all the fighting blood of his father in him, shouted :

“Fight for the cross, children of heaven ! Death at the hand of the unbeliever is a sure passport to heaven !”

And as he said it, the foremost ship of the Turks struck his own galley, and, with a yell, the dark-faced men leaped aboard.





CHAPTER VII.

CHAINS AND SLAVERY.

The contest between the Turks and the boys of the Children's Crusade was too unequal to last long. The big, fierce, bearded men, with their wild yells and ferocious faces, frightened the lads who dared to oppose them, almost before they had leaped aboard ; while the few who fought were cut with merciless ferocity. The slaves, chained down at the oars, howling with delight, caught at the unhappy boys who came near them and dragged them down beneath the benches to avenge the blows they had received.

Even flight did not avail the few who tried it. Their galleys, rowed by Turkish slaves, who refused to work and bit and fought like tigers in their desperation, were rapidly overtaken by the triumphant infidels. Within an hour from the time the Turkish fleet had been fully recognized, every vessel of the Children's Crusade had been taken ; every grown man on board stabbed or thrown overboard, save the old hermit. The poor boys, who had sailed forth, dreaming of regaining the Sepulcher, found themselves cast into the

holds of the enemy's galleys, or chained at the oars of the slaves that had been released by the Turks; prisoners to masters who gloated over their miseries and jeered at them in their strange tongue for what the Turks evidently rated at its true worth, the "Mad Crusade."

The sole exception to the fate of the crusaders was found in the person of young Count Stephen, who, fully armed and expert with his weapons, had fought like a tiger, killing three Turks with his own hand, through the skill taught him by his father. He had been at last overpowered by numbers, unwounded on account of the goodness of his armor. The Turks, recognizing in him the leader, with a respect for his bravery which was not uncommon in those singular wars, had granted him a sort of liberty, when he was taken on board the ship of the admiral, whose prisoner he was.

Big Peter had fought by his master till grievously wounded, and had been taken with Stephen on board the Turkish admiral's ship, where he lay on the deck, tended by Blanche, who was weeping silently over him.

The Turks had not harmed any of the girls, but had taken them all on board the admiral's ship, where they were huddled together in a shuddering group, fearing everything and complaining of the way in which "the old hermit had led them to destruction."

Yes, it had come to that. The old man, crouched in the stern of the boy count's galley, had been spared by the Turks and hauled on board their admiral's ship, where he sat in a corner in a stupor of despair, not daring so much as to raise his eyes from the deck.

Isabel Durance, the Queen of the Crusade, the crown, with which she had been invested at Marseilles, still

shining on her forehead as if in mockery of her misfortune, was trying to comfort her friends, but with ill success. Stephen, pale as death, an expression of utter despair on his face, stood by the stern of the Turkish admiral, and listened stupidly to the words of his conqueror, who spoke broken French, and was trying to find from him, as well as he could, what had brought him forth on such a mad errand.

"The medicine of adversity is bitter," said the Turk, sententiously, in the manner of his countrymen; "but the man that drinketh it findeth his health. How came it, O Frank, that thou hast ventured out to fight with men ere thy beard be grown?"

Stephen hung his head lower, but as the tone of the Turk showed that he expected a reply, he said, in a low voice :

"I trusted in Heaven, and *it deserted me*. That is all."

The Turk—a fine-looking man, of stout figure—frowned.

"That is not well said, Frank. There are many that call on the name of Allah, but he protects only those that obey his word."

Then he continued, sternly :

"Who is that old man who crouches yonder? Is he one of the mad mollahs * that they tell us about, who preaches that Allah wills his worshipers to kill one another?"

Stephen looked at Hildebrand bitterly, saying :

"He told us that the Lord would work a miracle, and we believed him."

The Turk bowed his head gravely, saying :

* "Mollahs" are Turkish priests. The Arabs call them "Imaums." Dervishes, marabouts and santons are different sects of priests, strongly resembling the monks and friars of Christianity.

"He is an old man. We have such among our dervishes, and they are under the protection of Allah. Let him live. His punishment has come already. But as for thee—who art thou that wishest Allah to work miracles for thee, when he refused to work them for his own prophet, on whose name be blessings?"

Stephen, bred up from his babyhood in a fiery hatred of the Arabian prophet, instantly answered sharply, and with his native courage :

"He was no prophet. He was a liar, and could work no miracle. *Our* saints have worked them."

The Turk flushed deeply, and his black eyes glowed, as he retorted :

"That is ill said, foolish Frank. This day hast thou seen that the God of heaven is with us and against thee and thy saints. But thou art a brave youth, after all, and we will make a good Moslem of thee, so thou shalt fight as well for the crescent as thou hast done for the cross."

"That will I never !" retorted the boy, fiercely. "Do thy worst, infidel, and thou shalt see how a Christian gentleman can die for his faith. It was for our sins that we have been punished, and but for them we could have overcome all the armies of the false prophet Mahound."

He spoke with all the bitterness of disappointment, and with an idea of so goading the Turk by his taunts that he might kill him ; for the excited boy, in his humiliation, could see no way in which life could be tolerable to him.

The Turk, for a moment, looked as if he were about to strike him ; but then, with a great effort, controlled his passion, saying :

"Men war not with boys. When thou art a man, in thy turn, thou canst tell other men that Dragut Aga

spared his prisoner, though he reviled the prophet of God. But God hears such things daily, and he lets the offenders live. Who is Dragut Aga that he should be more than his God? Thou speakest like a child."

So saying, the indignant Turk walked away from his angry prisoner, and was giving some directions to his men, when his ship was hailed from one of the captured galleys—the very one in which Stephen had been taken prisoner.

The hail and its answer were in a strange tongue, and the boy count did not understand them; but he perceived that the news sent from the captured vessel was of a nature that excited Dragut Aga greatly. The Turkish admiral gave orders to stop rowing, and as the other vessel dashed up alongside, they could see that the boy crusaders were working like madmen at the oars, while the late slaves, now turned masters, were flogging them unmercifully, accompanying every blow with laugh or jeer, as if they were revenging themselves on their late tyrants.

To poor Stephen, who saw it all as he stood by the stern of the Turkish admiral's ship, the scene was one of intense pain. Try as he might to steel himself by memories of the great cause, as he thought it, in which he had embarked, he could not help the conviction that, but for his joining the crusade as its leader, and rejecting the advice of his father and mother, these poor boys now suffering the tortures of slavery might have been safe at home in France. In spite of himself he uttered a groan, and as he did so, his eyes fell on his sister Blanche, kneeling by the side of poor Peter, whose pale face, already of that peculiar sickly hue that gives token of approaching death, dealt him another stab in his self-esteem. Blanche caught his eye, and made him a signal to come to her. Then,

as he knelt down by his dying foster-brother, Big Peter opened his eyes and smiled faintly, as he whispered :

"Good my lord, I shall never see Vaocluse again."

Then the young leader of the Children's Crusade broke down utterly, and sobbed as he knelt by his faithful servitor :

"Oh, Peter, Peter, if I could but give my life for thee, I would give it gladly."

Big Peter faintly moved his head in dissent.

"It is very easy to die, my lord," he whispered.

"The hard thing will be to live."

Stephen buried his face in his hands and sobbed. His stoicism had departed at last, and he had not a word to say, till Peter put out his feeble hand and touched him, whispering :

"It is the place of the servant to die for his lord. But *you* will see France again."

Stephen started at the words, and gazed earnestly in the face of his dying foster-brother.

"Alas ! Peter, thou art not in thy right senses," he said. "No one ever came back from captivity to the Turks. And if they would give me freedom, what should I be to take it, when all these poor Christians will toil out the rest of their lives under the lash ?"

Then, as he noted the face of his foster-brother, he added :

"Let me send Father Hildebrand to thee, to soothe thy last moments."

Big Peter allowed an expression of strong dislike to cross his face, as he said :

"Any one but him, my lord. But for him, we should all be safe at home, and your lady mother happy, as she was a week since. No, no, my lord. If my sins cannot be forgiven without sending to save me the

man who had wrought all this mischief, let me die unshriven."

He closed his eyes in his weakness, and spoke no more. Just at that moment, the bustle on board the other vessel increased as the two ships came together, and a man stepped from the rail of the captured galley to that of Dragut Aga's ship.

Then arose a great shouting on board the Turkish admiral's ship. The sailors and soldiers crowded round the newcomer, whom they received with every mark of the most extravagant joy ; while Stephen, absorbed in the dying struggles of his foster-brother, did not look up till he heard his sister's voice, saying :

"It is all over, Stephen. He hath gone where there are no sepulchers or death. Peter was a faithful servant and will have his reward, though he did not take the cross."

Stephen saw that she spoke the truth. His foster-brother had gone, and the poor, deluded boy bent his head lower, burying his head in his hands and groaning :

"And *he* died for me, too."

Then he sank into a stupor of misery, from which he was roused by a rude hand on his shoulder ; and looking up, he beheld Dragut Aga, with a young man by his side, who, from his dress, was a Turk, though that dress was only a slave's tunic.

Dragut signed Stephen to get up, and said to him :

"Now, young Christian, thou shalt see that the servants of the prophet are stronger than the servants of the cross. Knowest thou who this youth beside me is ?"

Stephen stared stupidly at him, and then turning his head, beheld his sister Blanche gazing at the

young Turk with an expression as if she recognized him. But he could only shake his head, saying :

"I know him not."

Then the young Turk himself spoke, eying him with a smile of triumph that Stephen did not understand.

"I am Saphadim, the son of the sultan of Jerusalem. I was a slave, toiling on the oar in your ship. Your boys, who thought they were men, smote me with whips. I found in that galley but one who showed me kindness. But she wore no cross. Behold the one in all thy fleet who shall be set free and sent home again. But as for thee, who hast allowed a prince of the house of Saladin to be struck with whips, thy doom is sealed. You shall all see Jerusalem, but ye shall curse the day in which ye saw it. Take the Christian dog and chain him to an oar, that he may know what it is to fight against the servants of Allah."

As he spoke he made a signal, at which two stalwart Turks rushed at Stephen, and were about to drag him off, when Blanche, with a shriek she could not restrain, darted forward and clung round the knees of the young Turkish prince, crying :

"My lord, my lord, it is my brother : Give him to me, and I will bless thy name forever ! We are the only children of our parents, and they are old. Forgiveness of injuries is blessed, but revenge never ends. Give me my brother !"

Prince Saphadim seemed to be astonished as he listened to her, for he echoed amazedly :

"Thy brother ! This ! But I thought *this* was thy brother !"

He pointed, as he spoke, to the dead body of Peter, which had not yet been removed.

Then, as Blanche began to explain, he waved her off, saying :

"But that is all one. Five years have I suffered in the prisons of the Christians, and they must be avenged. This alone I give thee : If thy brother serve me faithfully for five years, I will set him free after that time, and he shall be my own slave ; but the rest shall be sold in the market."

Blanche heard him, and answered :

"Then, if he stays, so do I. I came on this ship to be nigh him, and I would not go back to my father and mother without him. Give us both our freedom or neither."

The young Turk seemed to be amazed at her speech, for he said :

"Nay, nay ; consider that this is but a foolish thing thou sayest. It is good to be free, but a slave is lower than a dog. Take thy freedom and go home in happiness."

"I will stay by my brother," said the undaunted girl, steadily, "and nothing shall tear me from him."

And as if to show him that she meant what she said, she went and put her arms around Stephen, who only hung his head lower than before, his face assuming an expression of deeper contrition than it had yet worn.

The Turkish prince and Dragut contemplated the two in silence, and Stephen muttered, feebly :

"Take thy freedom, Blanche, while thou canst. Thou cant do us no good by staying, and it will be but one more to make miserable."

"Brother," she answered, quietly, "when thou didst take the cross I refused to follow thee, for our Lord never meant men to kill one another for the sake of an empty tomb ; but now that thou art in suffering, and I

can help thee, I am ready to share thy lot in adversity, though I would not take the cross."

Just at that moment young Saphadim, who seemed to have been considering how he could discharge his obligation of gratitude to Blanche, about which he was evidently superstitious, without letting go his vengeance on the rest, spoke again.

"Girl," he said to Blanche, "I have offered thee liberty, and thou hast refused it. I have said that thy brother shall have but five years' slavery, after which he shall be free. Ask of me the life and liberty of any of these in exchange for thine own and thou shalt have it. The prophet saith that gratitude is like the seed of wheat that is scattered on fertile ground ! It increaseth forever."

Blanche was surprised at the way he spoke, but shook her head, saying, quietly :

"If thou couldst grant me the lives of all here in return for my own, then would I gladly give it up ; but what profit would it be to the rest of these poor creatures if one were to be released ? It would but make the bitterness of slavery the more bitter for those who remained in chains."

"Nevertheless," persisted the young Turk, "ask the liberty of one of these here, and thou shalt have it freely."

The girl hesitated a moment, and then said :

"Free my brother, then, and take my life !"

The Turk bowed his head with a look of some disappointment.

"I have promised it, and it shall be done, though I would it had been another. He shall be freed at once."

Then, turning to Stephen, he went on :

"Art thou willing to take thy liberty at the price of that of thy sister ?"



CHAPTER VIII.

THE RANSOM-SEEKERS.

The question of the young Turk to Stephen was put in a tone of proud contempt, as if the speaker despised the person to whom it was addressed, but expected it to be answered in the affirmative.

Count Stephen listened silently, like a man in a dream, but made no answer till the words had been repeated. Then he said, in a low tone, as if he were thinking deeply :

“It needed but that ; it needed but that !”

He shook his head as he spoke ; but the Turk, not understanding what he meant, repeated impatiently :

“Give me thine answer, slave ! Dost thou wish thy freedom ?”

Then Stephen turned on him at last, as if he fully understood what he had said, and his eyes shone with a strange light as he replied, looking the Turk in the face :

“What should be said of a man who would buy his life at the price of another’s, and how would your prophet look on such a man ?”

Thus addressed, Saphadim answered directly :

“The prophet would say that such a man purchased pleasure in this life at the expense of the fires of Eblis in the next.”

Stephen pointed to the dead body of Big Peter, continuing :

"Thou hast said, unbeliever. And now I will answer thee as becomes a Christian gentleman. There lies the body of my foster-brother, who took no cross, but followed me for the love of me. He lies dead on thy deck, and I was the cause of his death and the captivity of all these poor children round us. I came hither against the counsel of my father ; spite of my mother's tears. My sister is in thy power, and but for me she would not be here. Take me ; punish *me* as long and as heavily as thou wilt. Nothing can be worse than my deserts. But I charge thee that thou send her away, and with her that old man who led us hither. She has asked for my freedom. I refuse it. I refuse to let her share my captivity, and I ask that she be permitted to go hence, with this old man, and beg a ransom from all Christians for these children who have been led into misery. As for myself, I will take no freedom as long as there is one of these who followed me in bonds. Chain me to an oar at once and let us end this matter as it should end. I was the leader ; I should be the chief sufferer."

He spoke earnestly, but without enthusiasm, in a low, clear tone, with his eyes fixed on those of the young Turk, who seemed to be struck, for the first time in their interview, with a sense of respect for his prisoner.

Saphadim nodded slowly and said in answer :

"That is the way our prophet would have judged the matter. If thou wert a true believer, I might think well of thee. But thy words are wise and shall be performed."

Then, turning to the old monk, who had been crouched in the stern of the galley during the whole

scene, as if blind and deaf to all that was passing, he continued loudly :

“What, ho, there ! Awake and hear what we have decided for thee !”

Old Hildebrand turned slowly round and demanded faintly :

“Who calls a poor lost soul ?”

Saphadim stared at him with some surprise, as the old man spoke ; but, with the respect for age which all Moslems show, he told him what had been agreed on.

“Thanks to this lady, thou art to be set free, to go with her to the cities and castles of the Franks and beg a ransom for these fools, whom thou hast led away to destruction. Art thou willing to go with her, and beg for them ?”

Old Hildebrand listened quietly, and then rose to his feet with difficulty and tottered forward to where Stephen was standing by his sister. There the old man stopped and eyed the boy fixedly. He seemed to be unable to speak for a little, but at last said :

“Ay, it is the same bright, young face that I saw in the market-place of Vacluse. So young and so bright ! It seemed as if a voice from heaven called to me : ‘There is the leader that will take the children to the Sepulcher of the Lord.’ And yet I was in error. It was the voice of an evil spirit, and it has led them all to slavery and worse than death. Oh, my Lord Stephen, why did they not kill me and not leave me to see what has come to thee and all the tender little ones ?”

Saphadim interrupted him impatiently, saying :

“Enough of this. Thou shouldst have thought of all that ere thou didst lead away these children. Allah has permitted thee to live, to see the consequences of false prophecy. Wilt thou go and beg a ransom for these prisoners ?”

The old monk raised his hands to his forehead, with a wistful look at the children round him. He seemed to be distraught with the woe that had come on him.

Blanche, seeing his inability to comprehend the question clearly, came to his side and took his hand, saying gently :

"Holy father, it is I. They will not let me buy my brother's freedom, but they have consented that thou and I shall depart to France to beg a ransom for these poor children. Wilt thou go with me?"

Hildebrand shook his head slowly.

"It is impossible," he said, with a dreary look in his eyes. "How shall I face them all, and what shall I say *when the mothers ask me for their children?* Child, child, I am accursed forever, and my portion for eternity shall be to look on those I doomed to death. And yet I was so sure I was right! It seemed as if a voice from heaven led me on, when I was preaching, and that these pure young hearts must deserve a miracle, to crown their efforts. And now it is only left to me to die."

The girl took him by the arm and looked in his face saying :

"Father Hildebrand, art thou sure thou art not as wrong now as when *my mother pled to thee to let her only son go?*"

The monk shuddered at her words and exclaimed brokenly :

"In mercy let me forget that! Child, child, dost thou wish to torture me before my time?"

"*Canst thou escape the memory?*" asked Blanche, in the same quiet way, not permitting him to evade her eyes, from which he shrank with a shame that even the callous Turks noticed and pitied.

Then, as he did not answer, she went on :

"Whether is it better, to make amends or to shrink from punishment?"

Thus urged, the old monk could but answer, faintly :

"To make amends, daughter. But that is not possible now."

"And whether," continued the girl in the same solemn way, "is it better to fall into the hands of man or into those of God?"

This time the old man shuddered violently, and cast an instinctive glance upward, as he realized the meaning of her question. She saw the effect of her words, and without insisting on an answer said :

"We all have our punishment to bear. My brother will bear his, and I mine. I, too, left my mother without her leave. It is fit that I should meet her and bear her reproaches. Thou must either bear thy punishment *now* or *hereafter*. Come with me, and we will weary the ear of France with our prayers for help and mercy for these children who have been led astray. When the last shall have been ransomed, we can say : 'We are but unprofitable servants. We have done that which was our duty to do.' *Wilt thou come with me?*"

While she was speaking, the old monk seemed to be gradually taking in her meaning, for he began to tremble, as if oppressed with a fear almost too great to bear.

When she had finished, he faltered, brokenly :

"Child, child, *anything but that!* Let them make me a slave ; let them torture me to death ; let them rack these old bones with pain and burn me slowly ; but not that, *not that!*"

Saphadim had listened to the colloquy between the two with a silence and attention that were remarkable for one of a different faith in those days of intolerance and bigotry. Now he came forward and laid his hand on the old man's shoulder, saying :

"Father, thy head is white, and the prophet hath said: 'Let the old be held in honor by the young.' But if the prophet himself were here to judge this thing, he would say to thee: 'To every man is given his punishment, and he that rebelleth, rebelleth against God.' Go with the child and beg the ransoms for the other children. For every one shall be paid ten pieces of gold; and the leader shall be redeemed last of all. I have spoken. Go, and remember that but for this girl, and the mercy she showed to me, thou wouldst not be given even this chance. I have spoken."

And he turned away, leaving the old monk still trembling, but not daring to make any further objection to his task.

The fleet of the Turks was turned about toward the coast of France, the captured ships of burden, that had contained the most of the boy crusaders, being sent away to the east, while the galleys hovered in a long line, with broad intervals between their prizes and any strange vessels that might be sent out to rescue the children. When they were almost out of sight, Dragut, in his stately ship, headed a squadron of twenty galleys and sailed for the port of Marseilles, in sight of which he arrived during the night, being warned of his vicinity by the lights on the coast, and lying by for the period of darkness till the rising sun showed the city of Marseilles before them.

Then a galley with a white flag was sent forward, having the hermit and Blanche on board, and rowed into the harbor amid a great scene of excitement on the part of the citizens.

At first it was thought that the Turks meditated a descent on the town, and the bells were rung from the church-steeple, while the citizens ran to arms in haste.

When it was perceived that only one vessel was com-

ing to the harbor, the alarm was somewhat moderated ; but a galley belonging to the military order of the Knights of St. John, which was the only armed craft in the harbor, began to get ready for sea, with the idea of danger, till the form of the hermit was seen on the high prow of the Turkish galley and recognized at once.

Then all sorts of rumors flew about the town, but by the time the galley reached the water-stairs and sent the hermit and the girl on shore in a boat, people had realized the truth. They had seen the departure of the Children's Crusade, two days before, with the singing of hymns, and now they saw its leader returning a prisoner to the Turks.

When the hermit and his youthful companion had been set on shore, with them came a formal letter from the Turkish admiral, Dragut Aga, in which he stated the terms on which alone he would release the Christian children that had fallen into his hands.

He demanded for each child a ransom of ten pieces of gold, of the coinage then called "ducats," from the legend stamped on them, which ended in the word "*ducato*," meaning "duchy," they having been coined first in the duchy of Palermo, in Sicily. The value of the ducat in those times was about two dollars and a half of our money in gold ; but as the price of gold was just three times what it is now, the ransom demanded for each child was about seventy-five dollars, as it would be counted in our times.

This seems a small sum, but in those days, when money was very scarce, it was heavy enough.

The reading of the admiral's letter, with the news of the captivity of the children, created such a scene of weeping and wailing as had never been seen in Marseilles since the times of the first crusade, when Peter the Hermit had preached the woes of the pilgrims.

Poor Father Hildebrand, the cause of all, was overwhelmed with the reproaches of fathers and mothers demanding their children, and began his penance, as he had dreaded, with the first step he took on French soil.

But for the help of his brave little companion, who showed the same courage in supporting her aged friend which she had once shown in confronting him when he was thundering out his texts, it is probable that the old man would have broken down and died of grief in Marseilles ere he had taken a step beyond it.

But Blanche de Vaux, with a constancy that never failed her, took him with her wherever she went, and so worked on the people with her sweet face and gentle ways that they began to give liberally for the ransom of those children whose parents were too poor to buy them back.

The richer nobles, indeed, whose boys had gone with the Children's Crusade, were only too eager to pay their money and get back the captives at once ; but Dragut and Prince Saphadim had foreseen the necessity, if they hoped to have any considerable number of the captives ransomed, that the poor should take their chance along with the rich. He had arranged that, as fast as the money was paid, it should be sent out in a vessel to sea, promising that he would send in prisoners, to be selected by lot, answering to the money sent. But no Christian was to be allowed to visit the captives, and he gave solemn warning that, if any rescue were attempted, the ransoms would cease at once, and all the children sold into slavery in the far East, where they would never see their homes again.

Those who were ransomed should be taken by lot, and in no other way, save that the leader of the crusade, Count Stephen de Vaux, was to be held till the last captive had gone home.

At first the money was slow to come ; for the parents, in Marseilles being chiefly merchants, thought the risk of their own children being passed over in the lots too great to permit them to risk their money.

But, thanks to the unwearied efforts of Blanche and the pathetic appeals of old Father Hildebrand to his hearers, to "save souls from death and ransom the captives," within a week a thousand ducats had been raised, and the galley of the Knights of St. John, which had been held in waiting for fear of the Turks, was sent out with a flag of truce, and found one of Dragut's galleys near Corsica, in a place which had been named in the letter.

The thousand ducats were paid over to the Turkish officer, who had been deputed to receive them ; and the Turk, on his part, performed his promise faithfully, by turning over to the galley of the Christians a hundred captives, of whom, as it happened, no less than forty-five belonged to Marseilles, while the rest came from other parts of France.

Their arrival caused a deal of joy ; and then, for the first time, the old hermit, who had hitherto been bowed down with sorrow and incapable of entertaining hope, began to regain his courage and plan another tour of preaching ; but this time on an errand of mercy, and not of blood.

He organized the returned children into a band with which he passed through the whole south of France till they neared Vaucluse, rousing the people everywhere by the news he brought, and using such of the returned captives as would follow him, to paint, in true colors, the condition of the children who had been left behind.

In this way he reached a good many more people ; and, by the end of the second week after the first ar-

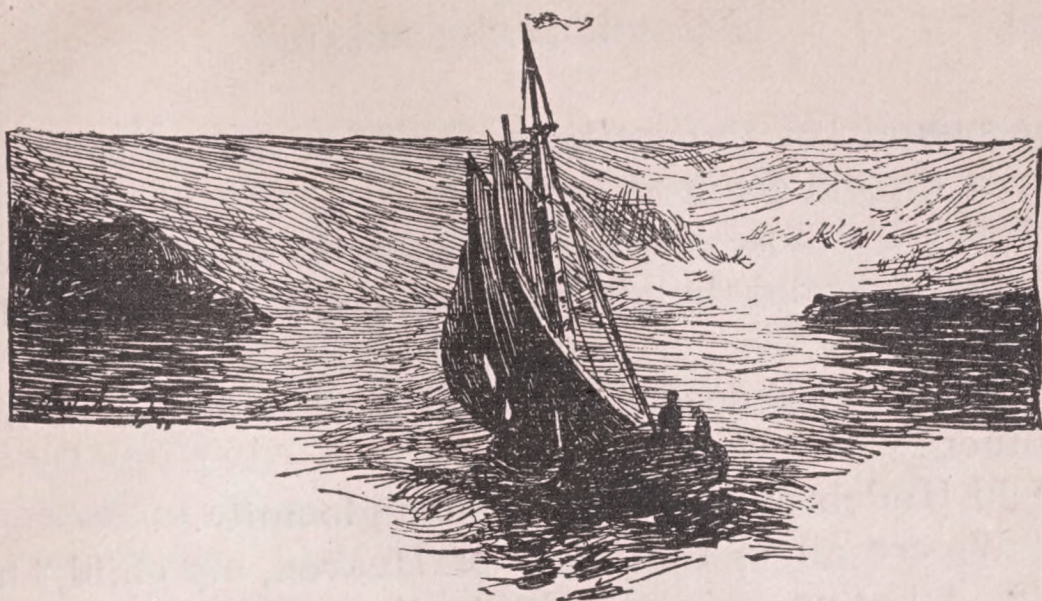
rival of captives, no less than ten thousand ducats had been raised in contributions from the faithful, for the release of others.

And then it was that, as they approached Vacluse, near which was the castle of Vaux, that Blanche, who had hitherto been the bravest of all, began to droop and exhibit fear of facing her own parents with the news of Stephen's sad fate.

And then the old hermit, who had hitherto been the one who had needed consolation, turned consoler in her need, and announced that he, as the one who had persuaded Stephen against his will to join the crusade, was the one who should bear the penalty of informing his father and his mother that their son had been taken captive and was a slave to the Turks.

And thus, on a fine summer evening, six weeks after Stephen had listened to the preaching of Hildebrand in the market-place of Vacluse, Blanche and the hermit drew near the castle as beggars and pilgrims.





CHAPTER IX.

CONCLUSION.

As the hermit and his young companion approached the castle the girl seemed oppressed with some fear that she could hardly explain to herself. There was a solitude and quiet reigning round her home to which it had been a stranger in the days she remembered so well.

The little village that clustered beneath the walls of the great donjon seemed to be deserted by most of its occupants, though the hour of sunset generally brought them all back from the fields.

As they drew near the castle itself, they were surprised to see that the gate was wide open, the draw-bridge down ; while the porter, who usually dozed on his bench by the entrance, was not to be seen.

Then, as they came fully in sight, Blanche uttered a cry of alarm and grief combined, as she clutched the arm of her aged companion and pointed to the tower, at

the summit of the castle, from which floated the banner of the old count at *half-mast*.

Even in those days the signal of death was well understood, and the girl faltered and hesitated as she gasped :

"Some one is dead ! Oh, heaven, if it should be my mother !"

Old Hildebrand bowed his head gloomily.

"We are all in the hands of Heaven, my child," he said. "Let us go in and inquire."

They slowly advanced toward the gate of the castle, but, ere they could enter the court, heard the solemn tolling of the chapel-bell, and beheld a funeral procession coming forth from the gate, the mourners bearing the bier on their shoulders, preceded by a horse led by a groom on foot and bearing the armor of a knight.

Blanche had sunk on her knees at the sight and watched the procession like one petrified, as it came slowly by her. Then she knew that it was not her mother that had died, but a flood of almost equal sorrow rushed over her as she recognized her father's favorite charger in the animal at the head of the *cortége*.

Her father had died ; and before the procession had fully passed, followed by all the vassals of the estate on foot, she beheld a black-robed figure, between two of her mother's ladies, and knew it was the widowed countess, following the body of her husband to the grave.

She drew back out of sight, with the old hermit, who seemed to be overcome once more with the shame and humiliation that had overwhelmed him when he first landed at Marseilles and heard the mothers calling for their children. Neither he nor Blanche dared to go forward, where they might be recognized, till the funeral was over, but followed the mourners silently

and unobtrusively till the body of the old count had been laid to rest beneath the walls of his castle.

Blanche quickly noticed, among the mourners, a tall, stern-looking knight, with a haughty, disagreeable manner, and recognized the cousin, who was next in succession, and whom she knew her mother had always feared and disliked. It had come to this, that, in consequence of the mad crusade of the children, the castle of her father had fallen to a stranger, and that her mother was liable to be turned out into the cold world as soon as the funeral was over.

Poor Blanche knew well enough that, by the famous "Salic Law," neither she nor her mother could inherit the lands of which her brother Stephen was the rightful heir; but she knew also that, till Stephen was dead, they could resist the possession by their cousin, Gaston de Vaux, of the lands and castle.

Thus it became necessary for her to declare herself and tell the expectant heir that the Stephen he evidently thought dead, or as good as dead, was alive and would come back.

She had not long to wait, as the procession broke up; for her mother, turning toward home, caught sight of her; and in a moment there was a scene of confusion and excitement, as the poor widow, who had thought herself childless, rushed to her daughter and clasped her to her breast, weeping, chiding, blessing and protesting, all in a breath, while she overwhelmed her with questions, the while that the expectant heir stood by, scowling at the girl he knew well, and meditating what to do to secure the inheritance he was determined not to lose.

But even in those days, which we call "barbarous," there was some decency of public opinion; and Gaston de Vaux did not dare to turn the widow and orphan out

of the home they had so long occupied without a show of justice.

He pretended polite interest in both, accompanied them to the castle, inquired of Blanche what news she brought of the Children's Crusade, and lamented the fate which had taken the count from his domains "in the prime of his life," as he said.

Then Blanche heard from her mother how her father had died, and shuddered as she thought that, but for that wretched crusade, he might have been spared many a long year. It seemed that the count, after his return home and the discovery that both his children had deserted him, as he thought, had become morose and solitary in his habits, taking his only enjoyment, or rather his only consolation, under his affliction, by trying to drown his sorrows in drink.

He, who had been the most temperate of men, like most people in southern countries, had become, in the short interval between the departure of his son and the return of his daughter to the castle, a furious drunkard, who never stopped in his potations till he had become insensible to everything round him.

In one of these orgies, when he had been surrounded by his men-at-arms, who were drinking with him and his cousin, Gaston de Vaux, the old count had been drawn into an angry controversy about the crusade in which his son had embarked, had drawn his sword and tried to kill his cousin. Being disarmed by his men, who saw that he was no longer conscious of what he was doing, he flew into such a furious passion that he had burst a blood-vessel in his head and had fallen dead, almost in an instant, the day before Blanche arrived at the castle, his funeral having been hurried on by the expectant heir.

And after the story had been told, and the question

remained : What should be done to ransom the young heir of the castle ? Gaston was the person who displayed the most anxiety to be allowed to help in raising the ransom.

He insisted on remaining in the castle, "to protect his cousins in their inheritance against the possible assaults of the robbers who sometimes came even into Provence."

The poor women, glad of any protection, and beginning to think that they had misjudged the character of their cousin, consented to this scheme, and the result was that Gaston de Vaux brought to the castle quite a number of his own men-at-arms, whom he quartered in the room of the old De Vaux retainers, and gradually introduced, till the whole garrison was devoted to him.

Then, when Blanche and her mother were away at Vaucluse and among the neighboring counts trying to raise the sum that had been stipulated as the ransom, without which the boy count could not be allowed to return to his home, Gaston threw off the mask and seized the castle of Vaux, declaring himself the count, and proclaiming that his cousin Stephen had been slain by the Turks, which most people believed on the word of a rich man like Gaston.

As soon as he had accomplished his purpose, the new count, abandoning the pretense of affection for his cousins that he had kept up till he gained possession of the castle and lands of Vaux, turned them out of the home they had enjoyed so long, and coolly bade them, if they wanted to get back, to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and beg the freedom of Stephen from the Grand Turk, if they still dreamed that he was alive.

Thus, at one stroke, the poor countess found herself deprived of home, husband and son, and reduced to beggary in her age, for in those times there were no

such things as "settlements" in France, and the reign of law was precarious in the midst of the various civil wars and quarrels between barons and counts.

But for the courage of Blanche, whom nothing seemed to terrify, the countess would have sunk under her misfortunes. As it was, with the assistance of her daughter and Father Hildebrand, who seemed to be roused out of his apathy as soon as there was a chance to work for the good of others, she secured a shelter in a convent, of which the lady abbess was a relative of the dead count, while Blanche and the hermit continued their efforts through the country, to secure the ransom of the captives.

They travelled far and wide through France, their sad story attracting sympathy wherever they went; but as time passed on and the fate of the children grew more distant, the collections became more and more scanty, till they ceased altogether. Three thousand of the children had been ransomed, and news came that the Turkish prince was weary of the delays, and had determined to sell the rest of his captives in the market in Egypt, without waiting for any more money from France.

Sold they were, all but Stephen, the boys to be turned into mamelukes, who were Christian slaves compelled to profess the faith of the prophet Mohammed, and trained as enemies of the very faith for which they had madly taken the cross.

Of poor Stephen nothing was heard, and as time went on, Hildebrand sank under the weight of his years and the remorse to which he had been subject ever since the failure of the crusade.

Then poor Blanche was left alone in the world, and with the firm determination which had always distinguished her character, resolved that she would find her

brother, alive or dead, if she had to go to Jerusalem on foot.

In those wild days, with all their lack of what we call "civilization," there was one advantage possessed by the poorest : The garb of a pilgrim to Jerusalem, consisting of a brown woolen robe, with a broad hat, in which was stuck a scallop-shell, enabled the wearer to travel safely in every Christian country without any money, for it was counted a shame to refuse alms to a pilgrim.

Blanche de Vaux, after visiting her mother at the convent, took the pilgrim's staff and made her way on foot through Italy to Venice, and thence across the whole of what are now Servia and Bulgaria, to the city of Constantinople, that had been in the possession of the Greek Emperor Comnenus till the year 1204, when the crusaders, under Baldwin, Count of Flanders, instead of fighting the Turks they had sworn to drive from the Holy City, had turned out their fellow-Christian, Comnenus, and set up the Latin empire of Baldwin in his stead.

It had been an act of the most bare-faced robbery, but it had this advantage for poor Blanche that it enabled her to travel as far as the Hellespont in a nominally Christian country, where pilgrims were protected and welcomed.

From Constantinople she was put across the Bosphorus in a boat, by charity, and then began the real perils and hardships of her journey, as she toiled on, on foot, through the country of the Turks she had been accustomed to think of as "cruel infidels and wild beasts," determined to suffer anything, so long as she found her brother Stephen. She had one hope in using the name of Prince Saphadim, whose gratitude she remembered well, and whom, she told the Turks

she met, she was going to see. This name she soon found to be a tower of strength; for Saphadim, it seemed, had been made sultan, and any person going to see him was sure of protection on the journey.

It took the poor girl a long time to reach Jerusalem, for she had to walk every step of the way, as she had done from France, and was frequently stopped, and sometimes carried off, for a time, by the numerous robbers who infested the Turkish territory, who would keep her a prisoner awhile, but always released her at last, when they had sent to some place, of which she was ignorant, to ascertain if her name was known to the Turkish sultan.

In every instance the message came back that "the woman was to be allowed to depart in peace," though no help was extended to her. It seemed strange to her that robbers should have such a respect for the name of the sultan, but she found out at last that what she thought common robbers were merely chieftains, like the barons in France, who claimed sovereignty over certain spots and the right of levying tribute on all the pilgrims that came in their way. And as the poor girl could not pay for her release, she would have been sold for a slave many a time but for the potent spell of the name of Sultan Saphadim.

At last, nearly four years after the ill-starred enterprise of the Children's Crusade, Blanche de Vaux reached Jerusalem, and boldly demanded an audience of the sultan. She was admitted to his presence at once, with the simplicity characteristic of the Moslem of that day when he became a sovereign. Saphadim the Turk, mindful of the precepts of the Koran, though not a Christian, showed the poor pilgrim a kindness no Christian had yet exhibited to her.

At first he hardly recognized, in the emaciated, sun-

burned woman who came, the slender, beautiful girl who had saved him when a slave from the lash of the cruel crusader ; but as soon as she spoke and reminded him who she was, the haughty young prince melted into tears at the pathetic story of her sufferings, and told her she should have any gift she asked for.

Blanche pleaded only for the freedom of her brother, and Saphadim sent for him at once, and restored to the arms of his sister Stephen, the once brilliant young boy count of Vaucluse, now a haggard, dark, emaciated slave, who had been toiling on the fortifications of Jerusalem, digging wells, carrying heavy blocks of stone for the masons, driven to his work under the lash day after day till all the fire and impetuosity of his boyhood had been knocked out of him, and the young man of only twenty-two looked like one of forty.

He had almost forgotten, in his misery, the face of his sister, and when she spoke to him could hardly believe her story.

But at last they were sent away by the generous Sultan Saphadim, clothed at his expense, and supplied with money, in a ship which was about to sail for Italy. They departed, and were landed safely at Naples, whence they proceeded to France, still in the guise of pilgrims, as the safest dress in the disturbed state of the country, where Christians were fighting one another as fiercely as ever.

As Stephen advanced through the midst of more familiar scenes, he gradually regained the balance of his mind, which had been almost fatally disturbed during his slavery, by the influence of the remorse that had preyed on him, at the sight of his companions dying by scores under the hardships which they might never have had to suffer had he not led them on that terrible Children's Crusade. When he entered Provence

and neared his father's castle, he was much affected ; but took his measures effectually to get back his inheritance. He found it necessary to challenge the villain Gaston to the "trial by combat," which was then a legal way of deciding an issue at law ; overthrew him, and finally regained his inheritance.

There we might end his story, but for the question that occurs to us—How about the moral that lies hidden in it ?

Let Stephen himself give it, in his words, in the old chronicle, from which these facts have been gleaned.

"I hold to this," he says, in the quaint old Provençal, which we are obliged to translate for our modern readers, "that the empty tomb of Christ, though a desirable thing, is not worth the spilling of one drop of blood. And I hold, further, that a woman, in her love, will go farther than a man in his valor ; and that the same God is worshiped by Turk and Christian ; so that the man who fights for his religion fights against his God."

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